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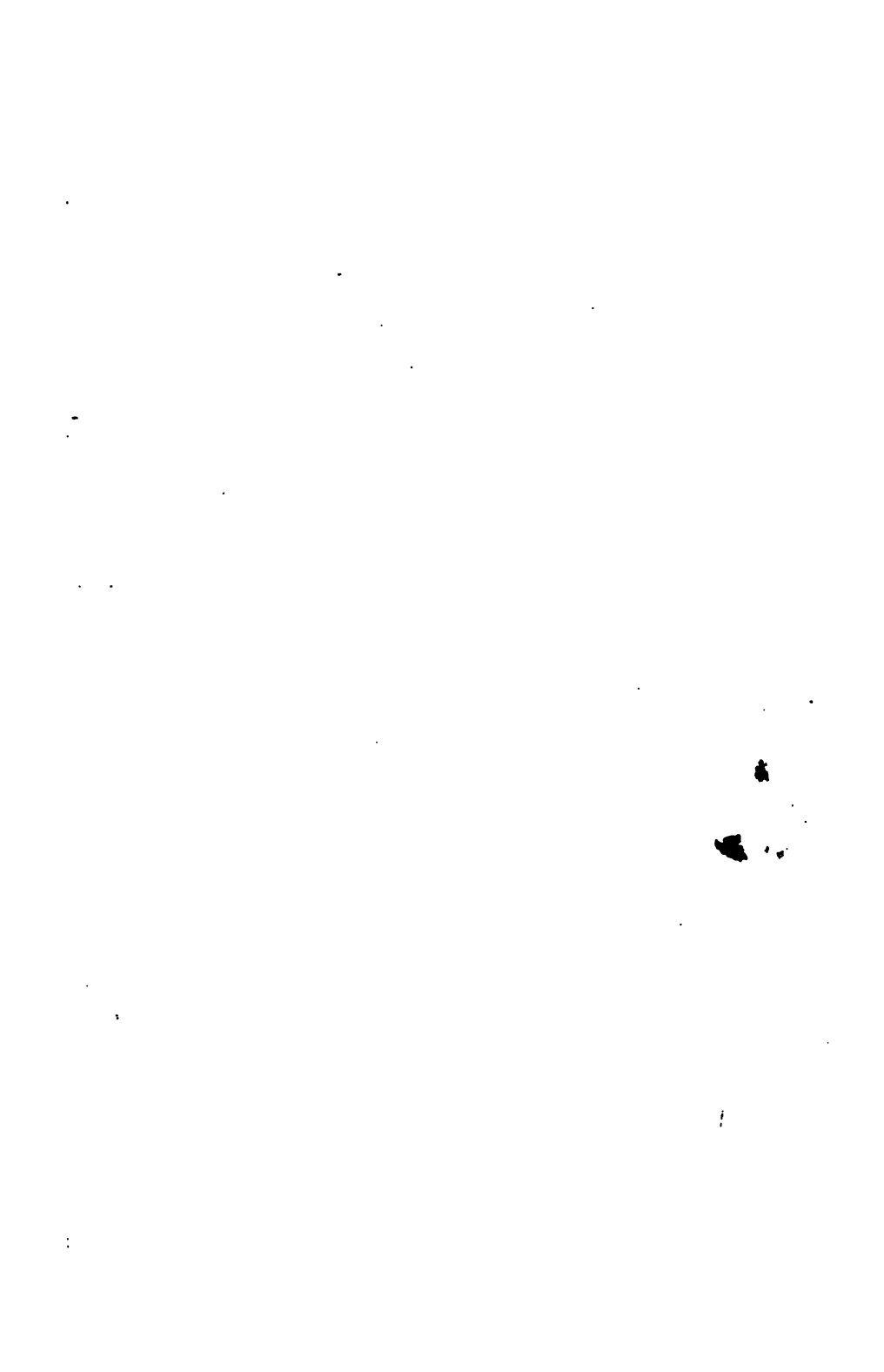


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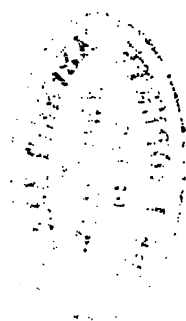
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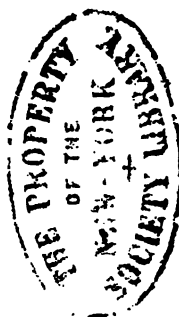
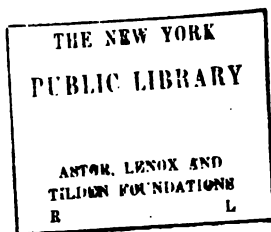
*Anna
Chapin
Ray*





A WOMAN WITH A PURPOSE







"I am your chum, Leonard; but more than that, I am your wife."

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A WOMAN WITH A PURPOSE

BY

ANNA CHAPIN RAY

AUTHOR OF "QUICKENED," "ACKROYD OF THE FACULTY,"

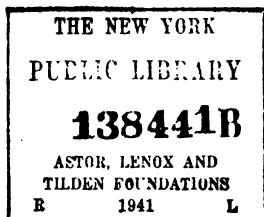
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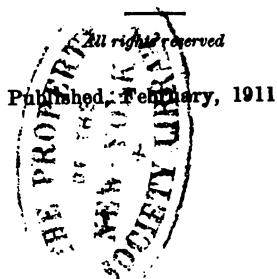
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A WOMAN WITH A PURPOSE

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A WOMAN WITH A PURPOSE

CHAPTER ONE

"How foolish she is!" the world said, when Dorcas Sloane told Leonard Coit that she would not marry him.

"But I don't see any especial reason that I should," she argued quietly, her head a little on one side in her attitude of deepest consideration.

Coit cast aside the more sentimental phases of his previous argument and exposition. Instead, —

"But I would take such good care of you," he urged.

That was his last, worst blunder. The chin of Dorcas lifted a little.

"I am not altogether sure that I want to be taken care of — yet," she said rather perversely. "It seems to me that I am not altogether incapable of looking out for —"

Coit rose and stood gazing down at her, dignified, even a little stately, with his erect figure and his thatch of snow-white hair, the hair which had first drawn upon him the wayward attention of Dorcas Sloane. It was counted well-nigh impossible to please the girl's critical eyes; the contrast between Coit's young face and aged hair had achieved the miracle. Now the face was sterner than it was its wont to be.

"Yourself." Quietly he finished up her sentence for her. "You are. Very likely you always will be; at least, as long as I am able to be at your service."

THE END

She liked the half-veiled reference to the difference in their ages. It saved her putting into words several of her own more important reservations. Her silence and her little nod were full of consideration for all the things he was too wise to say.

Then he smiled slightly.

"I might," he suggested; "also add that you could take care of me, only it seems a little too much like begging as a favour what I wish only as a free gift. Like you, I don't want to be taken care of — yet."

"You never will," she told him, with the abrupt, boylike frankness which he had found her greatest charm. "That's what has made us such good chums; at least —" She floundered, colouring hotly, as a glance at his white head reminded her that *chums* was scarcely the word she should have chosen.

His laugh showed her that he had read her thought; under it, she coloured still more hotly.

"Why not chums?" he asked her quickly. "The word holds good, even if I am Nina Oliver's uncle, and old enough to be your father. Why not? It's temperament, not years, that ages one. My mother used to tell me I'd never grow decorously old; and you —"

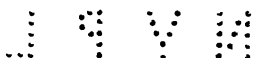
Dorcas stiffened her lips for an instant.

"I was never really young, you mean?" she asked him, with a dry little laugh.

The laugh jarred upon him. His face showed the jar, and the quick way he once more dropped down at her side.

"No," he assented slowly. "No, dear child, you never have been. It is the first lesson of all those that I want to teach you."

Again her lips stiffened. Rather than give way before the little note of tenderness that throbbed in his voice, she would show herself perverse, aggressive, anything to maintain her dignity to the long interview's remotest end. Her only objection to Leonard Coit lay in the fact that he had sought



her, his hands full to overflowing. There was nothing left, on her side, for her to offer in return; he held it all. Her score of years when she had gripped the world and wrestled with it for just a few of its good things: this made her fearful of a future which sought to thrust upon her blessings unnumbered and unasked, unimagined, even. And yet, it would be so good to stop splashing in the shallows and drift in the still, deep tide. Nevertheless, being Dorcas, born to independence, trained to warfare, she merely stiffened her lips and raised her chin anew.

"Are there so many, then?" she queried.

With an effort, he recalled his mind, flown off upon a side track of that selfsame theme.

"So many?" he asked a little blankly.

"So many lessons that I need to learn." Her tone was sarcastic. So was her glance, as she rose to her feet.

In the crowded publicity of the great room where they were sitting, no course was open to Coit but to follow her example. Nevertheless, as he did so, his face lost its look of boyishness and stiffened into lines which matched the implication of his hair.

"Dorcas, you don't understand me," he said gravely. "At least — is n't it a new thing for you to misinterpret me like this?"

As she met his eyes, brown eyes and steadfast, her perversity fell from her. Once more she became her better, franker self.

"Yes, it is," she said. "It was childish of me, too. At least, though, I have the grace to be ashamed. As usual, however," her laugh was mirthless; "my penitence comes too late for it to do much good."

"Not if it makes you give me one more chance to try to —"

With a sudden imperious gesture, she interrupted him.

"Wait!" she said. "We must talk it out, now, to the bitter end; but not here. This place smothers one, when

she gets in earnest; and that fearful orchestra!" She shuddered. "Come outside. Perhaps there we can find a quiet corner. At least, it can't be worse than it is here."

He stood waiting, his heart on his lips and in his eyes, while she gave a slight shake to adjust the hang of her silken skirts, a slight pat or two to the lace which fell away from her round, bare throat. Then in silence he followed her out of the noisy dazzle of the reception hall, down the steps and away across the lantern-garlanded campus. Following her so, he admitted to himself that he would have gone on over half the world. And yet, in the past few months which had swept him from the trusted moorings of a placid middle age, he had never once been able to explain to himself the curious attraction he had felt towards this downright, wayward girl who was but one half-year older than his only son. His former marriage had been a thing of staid self-argument. He had chosen the most obvious girl in sight; their wedded life had been as irreproachable as it had been empty. His wife had never failed in any of her duties to him; yet never once had any sudden impulse betrayed her into a work of supererogation. He had supposed that his love for her had been all that his nature could experience. Eight months before this night, he had found out his mistake.

He had been down to New York to see Gordon, his son, off for Europe. Loitering about the city, afterwards, it suddenly had occurred to him to use up some of his leisure time in paying a flying visit to a niece whose intellectual tastes were so far modified by worldliness as to have led her to choose Smith College for her Alma Mater. Next day, he and his portmanteau were standing on the station platform, both of them looking unduly masculine in that environment. Next day after, he had met Dorcas Sloane.

The first impression she had made upon him was one of thankfulness that here at last was somebody he could separate and recognize out of a long procession of American girlhood, indistinguishable in its attractiveness, which

included even his niece. He had found it a nerve-racking experience, this curious conformity to type, this hideous uncertainty as to which girl of the dissolving, changing group that continually surrounded him, as to just which girl would address him as *Uncle*. At first, he had tried to keep them sorted out; at least, in so far as Nina was concerned. Nina was his niece. It was socially decent to be sure of her, even when she changed her pink frock for a blue one. By the end of the first day, however, Coit had given it up. As a matter of pure theory, he accepted the fact that they differed among themselves in language and in customs, as did the tribes of ancient Gaul. As a matter of fact, he could not tell one of them from another, until he met Dorcas. Then he realized a difference.

It was not until later on, though, that he understood the difference, grasped the fact that it stood for something more than brown hair and eyes, a slim, trim figure as graceful as it was boyish, and an unvarying trick of wearing brown hats and frocks and shoes. The difference was ingrained in herself. Its leading hallmark was a certain deliberation in choosing her purpose and her point of view, and then a certain curious, fearless recklessness in holding to the one, and in making straight for the other.

He had met her first in October, and now it was mid-June. There had been intervening months, of course; there even had been irrelevant interests. However, all in all, they had led directly up to this.

Now, to his surprise, Leonard Coit was discovering a barricade across the path which he had supposed to be quite open and easy. Up to the instant of his beginning their present talk, it had not once occurred to him to doubt its outcome. Dorcas had never held herself aloof from his society. Rather than that, indeed, she tacitly had taken as her own the place beside him at any of the little social functions Nina had been so fond of holding in his honour, when he came to visit her. He had so much to offer, too:

money, position, and a love whose energy and youthfulness surprised himself. And Dorcas, left an orphan in her childhood, had made no bones of telling people that her little inheritance would barely see her out of college; that she had chosen to have the one great thing she wanted, rather than the countless frugal trifles that she scorned; that she had determined to take one fat slice of life at a gulp while her digestion was at its best, rather than nibble grudgingly at the occasional sweets which would be tantalizing to her youth and cloying to her age.

"I'm going to live, while I do live," she told Nina, one day.

"And afterwards?" Nina had made prudent query.

"Then I'll earn my living," Dorcas made answer, and the answer might have been expanded into an epigram.

Coit had been absent in his own suburban city, when Dorcas had propounded her theory of the best way to live out her life. Had he been present, however, Dorcas would have seen no need to modify her statement of her programme. Neither, on the other hand, would he have seen the need to argue with her. Of the ultimate attainment of his wishes, Leonard Coit had felt no doubts.

Neither did he feel them now; it was only that the word *ultimate* must be taken so very literally.

"Is that your real reason, Dorcas?" he asked her, when at length she paused in her quick, incisive speech.

"If you want it still more baldly: I feel my feet, like a baby, and I want to walk alone," she persisted.

"You could walk beside me," he suggested.

"Impossible!" The word came crisply. "I know you too well, Mr. Coit. As soon as I came to a hard bit of road, you'd pick me up in your arms and carry me. At least," the colour flamed in her cheeks; "I mean it metaphorically, you know."

"But," impatiently he pushed aside her conventional amendment; "but, Dorcas, would it hurt you to be carried?"

She met his gaze fearlessly.

"Yes, it would. It would hurt my pride."

"I don't see why."

Under the white light of the summer stars, she faced him, and her expression now belied the difference in their ages; reversed it, almost.

"Wait," she said gravely; "and think it over just a little. Put yourself in my place, as far as any man can do. If I — married you, you would give me everything the world holds, except just one thing."

"What is that?" he broke in hastily.

She lifted her hand imperiously, by way of a demand for silence. Then, —

"Success," she told him, with even deeper gravity.

"Why not that?" he once more interrupted her.

As if in token of her weariness at this futile effort after comprehension, her hand dropped to her side.

"One only gives that to one's self," she answered slowly. "No, listen. If I were to become your wife, it would be a frank confession of my impotence. All my life, up to now, I have staked everything on my final power to make good. I have used up all my energy and, what counts for a good deal more, all my money, to fit myself to live out life as I have planned it. I have made no secret of my intentions, of my dreams. Now I am just ready to begin to work towards them, just ready to begin to prove whether or not I have it in me to make good. I believe I have. I know the process is going to take it out of me — hard; but I am ready to accept it as it comes. For four years, for more than four years, I have been bracing myself to face this week, the ending and the beginning of it all. And now, if I were to marry you —"

"Yes?" His voice sounded a little hoarse, as it cut into the pause.

"Everyone would say, and say it fairly, that, when it came to the point, I — funkcd." The word came with a shiver of disgust.

In the shadow of the shrubbery that ringed them in, he held out his hands to her.

"Then funk," he said shortly. "Dorcas, I could make you love me, if I only had the chance."

Her hands clinched themselves behind her back. Coit could hear the hissing rustle of her gown beneath the sudden pressure. Then, —

"That is the hardest part of it all," she murmured, as if only to herself.

"Dorcas!" And now his hands shut upon her round bare shoulders, while his eyes, beneath their snow-white crown of hair, blazed like the stars above them. "Do you realize what you are saying, child? Realize what it is your words must mean to me?"

Quietly she unclasped her hands, lifted them and put his hands away.

"I do realize it," she said then; "but it makes no difference, on that account. My life is planned, has been planned, out for ever so long. In it, you are nothing but an incident, a dear one, one I have learned to count on; and yet only an incident, for all that. I may be selfish, when I insist upon it that it is my own life that lies before me, not Nina's, not even yours; when I insist upon it that I must be free to live it out in my own way, as best I can."

"But I would leave you free," he urged her.

"You could n't. No man in your position could. The very fact of what you offer me is sure to blunt the point of all my efforts. My work would be only my pastime, not the very core and consummation of my being." She spoke excitedly. Then, with an obvious effort, she stilled the excitement. "I am sorry," she said; "very sorry, Mr. Coit. I shall always think back to you as — as the best man I ever shall have known. To marry you, though, would be impossible."

He was shrewd enough to realize the finality of her verdict. Nevertheless, —

"But why?" he asked her.

Her answer was fearless.

"Because, feeling to you as I do, caring for you as I do, and understanding you, perhaps, a very little bit, but yet all the time remembering what I want to do with myself — Why, because it would be a crime."

"Not to me," he contradicted.

"Yes, to you, to me, to the hopes we both have for the time ahead of us." She let a long pause fall over her slow words. Then, turning, she held out her hands to him in deprecating friendliness. "Mr. Coit, whatever it is that's coming to me, bad or good, I shall always be a little happier for having this night to remember and think back to."

He shook his head.

"I can't see why."

Her answering voice was very sweet and gentle.

"Because, just for once in my experience, an honest gentleman has offered me the greatest thing in life."

"You think so?" Again his voice grew eager.

"I know so."

"Then why not take it?"

"Because it is not for me," she answered sadly, and, in the white light of the stars, he could see the glittering drops upon her lashes. "A few of us are born that way, the ugly ducklings of this world. Much as we hate it, much as we long to accept the other thing, something inside us tells us we are bound to work out our own salvation; or —" Her voice broke a little.

"Or?" he urged her past the pause.

"Or else go under utterly," she told him, but her accent belied the rashness of her words.

"Dorcas!" Then he controlled himself. Perhaps he understood her better than he would have been willing to confess. Before the placid marriage of his early years, he too had throbbed with dreams, with brilliant visions of the things he had it in him to achieve. The visions had been

blotted out by the dazzle of his physical surroundings, the dreams put to flight before the drowsy sleep of full contentment. And yet, even now, he had hours of wondering whether, granted the incentive in his youth, he might not have arrived at something beyond a preternaturally comfortable middle age. However, "Dorcas," he said a little bit insistently; "I want you to promise me one thing."

"People never keep such promises," she warned him, with a valiant effort for her customary gay serenity.

He changed the line of his attack.

"What are you planning to do next?" he inquired.

Rejoiced that he was returning to the ways of practicality, she answered him as practically.

"I am going to New York, the first of the week."

"What then?"

"Work," she told him tersely.

"What sort of work?"

"Anything that will give me marmalade on my daily bread."

His quick intake of the breath startled her; but not so much as did the vehemence of his next words.

"Dorcas child, what are you saying! Have n't you anything especial arranged for?"

She shook her head.

"How could I? I must try my wings, before I am engaged to fly in public." Then she laughed. "How essentially modern I am! The last half of my metaphor smacks of an aeroplane."

"What do you really mean to do?" he questioned sternly, too intent now upon his question to vouchsafe a smile in answer to her laugh. "In plain Saxon, I mean?"

"In plain Saxon, I mean to write."

"For what?"

"Any trusting editor who will take me," she answered as jauntily as she was able, for she was quick to feel the disapproval in his tone. Then, under his quick scrutiny, her

jauntiness wilted yet a little more, and she added, "They say it is easy enough, once you have caught on."

"But, while you are catching on?" His hands, hanging by his sides, clinched themselves. "Child, do you know what you are undertaking? New York is so huge, and so lonely, and so very pitiless. Drop this insane idea of yours, and come to me, Dorcas. I will be so good to you, and leave you so very free!" His voice was pleading, pleading his eyes.

Dorcas almost yielded, caught herself and steadied sharply.

"I can't," she said faintly. "My way is chosen, and I must go on along it."

"Then," his hand shut upon one of hers; "then make me this one promise, Dorcas," he begged her. "If the time comes when your courage falters, promise to send for me. If I am still in this world, no matter where, I will come. You promise?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "I promise."

But, as she spoke and as he listened, they both knew full well in their secret hearts that promises such as that, even as Dorcas had just said, were destined never to be fulfilled.

CHAPTER TWO

"WHERE in thunder is the skimmer?" somebody demanded.

Dorcas glanced up from the biscuit tin in her hands. According to the label, one would have diagnosed the tin as holding *petits beurrés*; but Dorcas was lifting out a block of cake whose crumbly edges betrayed the fact that it had been born in no domestic kitchen.

"I always use a hatpin, Dickie," she said serenely.

"Hatpin be hanged! Why not a poker?" Dickie grumbled.

Dorcas set the cake on the table, then hunted in the corner of the tin box for a small jar of jam.

"A poker has no place in the modern scheme of civilization," she replied gravely. "It belongs to the days of spinning wheels and bread bowls and all the other lumber of departed housewifery, when people used to tie on their hats with a string and do things without electricity, and weep over *Thaddeus of Warsaw*. As I look back on my college days and college training, it seems to me that my most valued lesson concerned itself with the modern theory that woman, armed with a hatpin and a shoehorn, is able to face any emergency that life can offer her."

"A shoehorn makes a bully snow shovel," somebody else said, from the other edge of the group. "I know, for I left my window open, one night, in a Canadian blizzard. The chambermaid was English and terribly censorious, so I attacked the resultant drift, myself, with my shoehorn."

"Were you on time at breakfast?" Dorcas asked.

"Being on time is just the trick of getting there when you get ready, and making sure the other chap will get there, too. I say, Dorcas, what's the jam for?"

"To eat."

"But no sane person ever eats jam in the same breath with a bunny."

"Then I'm insane," Dorcas responded tranquilly. "Moreover, the jam is an emblem."

"Of?" The speaker, assaulting the cake with his pocket knife, held his weapon poised in time with his question.

"Success."

The knife fell.

"Sweet and sticky, Dorcas?" Dickie asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Not the latter, I suspect; at least, not for me. It's only that always, when I've prayed for daily bread, I've had my eye on the celestial jam pots. Charity won't let one starve for lack of a crust; but jam is a totally different —"

"Doubted!" The knife fell again. "I've starved more than once, since I took the world by the horns."

"Did charity know it?" another somebody queried.

"How can I tell? I knew it; and that's a good deal more to the purpose. Besides, it's charity's duty to find out about such things."

"Pleasure, more likely. Charity does its duty," somebody else observed sententiously.

And then there came a second wail from Dickie.

"Oh, for the love of charity, Dorcas, where is the skimmer?"

"Lost."

"Where?"

"In the mazes of junior year, along with all the other useful facts I had accumulated to take with me into college. I think," Dorcas spoke reflectively; "it might have gone with the *pons asinorum*, or else with the Mother of the Gracchi."

"Take a shoehorn, Dickie. It's just as good, and it does n't leak half so much."

"You don't want it, yet awhile." The girl beside Dickie spoke suddenly, out of her intent watching of his cookery.

"That rabbit is n't nearly done."

"No; but I am." Dickie wiped his brow with the back of his disengaged hand. "Open the window, somebody. This room is infernally warm."

"It's only your artistic nervous system," the girl made calm reply. "You must think of others, Dickie. You are n't in evening dress, as we are."

"Apropos, why this unwonted frilliness?" one of the men asked, with all the curiosity he could spare from the further contents of the great tin box wherein Dorcas was still digging.

The girl at Dickie's side detached her gaze from her neighbour long enough to smile at the other man demurely.

"We say it is to celebrate the triumph of Dorcas," she made answer; "but, in our secret and inmost hearts, we know it is to get our money's worth out of our frocks before they go entirely out of fashion. Dorcas," turning, she hurled the unexpected question full in the face of her friend; "for a matter of fact, how long is it since the last night you wore short sleeves?"

The reckoning did not take long. The reply of Dorcas came upon the instant.

"Four months and two weeks," she answered; but the flush that stained her cheeks was not for this confession of her changed surroundings.

"How disgustingly recent you are, Dorcas!" another of the girls rebuked her. "It's three years since I came out of college. This gown was created for my senior summer term, and it's done duty ever since."

"It looks it," Dickie muttered *sotto voce*, for the last speaker was his sister, and, moreover, he had just burned his forefinger rather badly. Forefingers are a consideration to a man who earns his living by playing accompaniments at the third-best concerts of the very rich.

However, in the general babble, no one heeded Dickie's mutterings. No one, that is, except the girl at Dickie's elbow; and she was too well aware of Dickie's unvarying

generosity to his sister to pay any great attention to his criticisms. Instead, —

"Let me do that, Dickie," she said, as casually as if her cheeks had not reddened at his wince of pain. "Dorcas has some sweet oil in that cupboard. You'd better put some on, it may take down the blister. Here, give me the spoon."

"You're a good little chap, Tony; you always are. Still, it's about stopped aching now." Dickie surrendered the spoon, however, and, when next he spoke, it was around the finger. "That wood alcohol does burn like fury, once it gets started."

"Like the torch of Dorcas's genius?" his sister queried. "Honestly, Dickie, I am no end sorry. Still, you can console yourself that, like the jam, you are an emblem, and hence sacred in Dorcas's pre-Raphaelitic eyes."

Dickie's response was once more *sotto voce*, as a fresh twinge of pain caused him to remove his injured finger from his mouth and survey it with anxious care.

"Sounds rather like paralytic eyes," he growled. "Don't know but it amounts to pretty much the same thing, though. Look at that blister, Tony! And I have to accompany the Damrosch *Danny* at Mrs. Peter's, to-morrow afternoon. From present signs, my smashing chords will be minus a note, every last time."

Tony, whose nickname betrayed the fact that she too had musical aspirations, rose to the emergency like the business woman that she was.

"Let me be your understudy, Dickie. I'll do it for fifty per cent and cartage for my harp. I've always wanted to be able to say that I had played at one of Mrs. Peter's things."

"Much better to be able to say you have played than it is to play," Dickie grumbled. "At things like hers, music is merely a spur to polite conversation. They only like the accompaniment, when it's not so noisy as to drown out their voices. Besides, you can't smash."

"No; but I can rumble and throb, and that's just about as good."

"Not so popular, though. Even if I interrupt the dears, they like the bedlam. They smile and lift their brows and look appreciative, while they catch breath and wait for a *pianissimo* when they can make themselves heard again." Dickie smiled sardonically at his finger. Then he asked, so casually as to remove all accent of criticism from the question, "I say, Tony, how did you ever happen on a harp?"

"Happen!" Tony stopped stirring.

"Yes, happen. No reasonable mortal would have chosen it inductively. He would know he could n't lug it about the country in his arms; the dray costs like thunder, and it never by any chance turns up on time. Why did n't you —"

"Dickie! Tony!" A rebuking cry cut in upon their talk. "Stir! Quick! I smell the bunny burning."

Meanwhile, across the room and slightly apart from the others of the group, Dorcas stood leaning on a corner of the biscuit tin, and listening with a tremulous little smile to the words of her companion. He was a tall, wide-shouldered man, older than the others in the room and a degree less modern in his point of view. His beard showed this no less plainly than did the quiet conventionality of his dress. His voice was deep, and as restful as were his eyes which now were looking down at Dorcas with a frank, big-brother sort of liking.

"Dorcas," he was saying gravely; "you don't belong in this."

She lifted her arching brows.

"This what?"

His glance left her face, to sweep expressively up and down the room. She felt no need for other answer.

"Why not? We are all good children, starving here together," she said defensively.

His reply startled her by its force.

"Yes, thank God! You are all good children," he echoed. And then the silence fell between them.

Dorcas studied her hands, now grown a little thinner than

they had been of yore. Meanwhile, he studied Dorcas. He took note of the brilliant face, refined, determined and yet a little wistful, as if already she were beginning to learn that Fate must be coaxed as well as fought. He saw the grim little lines about the corners of the lips; but he also saw between the arching brows the shadow of the vertical wrinkles that soon would be cut in too deeply ever to be erased by coming years. He studied the proud poise of the head upon the shapely shoulders; then he studied the lithe, boyish figure, alert even in its present attitude of lazy lounging.

"Dorcas, I wish you'd let me paint you," he said suddenly.

Her eyebrows moved upward towards her hair.

"Paint me!" Her laugh dispelled the thoughtfulness of her mood. "What nonsense, Pater!"

But Pater, as he was to all this group of struggling youngsters with whom, now and then, he loved to come and play, shook his head.

"No," he said thoughtfully; "it's not nonsense at all. The more I think of it, it's not a bad idea. I'd take you as you are, in that soft gown, and with the little pucker in your face and the little stiff perk of the head —"

"And the little biscuit tin?" Dorcas queried gayly.

He refused to be swayed from his idea.

"And I'd put it all in browns, against an old leather curtain. I've got a jolly good one in my studio; and it would all be dark, except the dress and the face and neck, and I'd call it —"

Even in his absorption in his scheme of colour, he was conscious of a surprise at the way her mirth fell from her, as she asked slowly, —

"Well?"

He pondered for a moment.

"*The Idealist*," he said then.

A fresh surprise overwhelmed him, as he heard the gay note of her laughter.

"How mean of you, Pater! And when you know I'm a

realist of realists, too! Did n't I show you my last story, the one that *Harper's* would n't take?"

"Don't put on such side, Dorcas," one of the men said, as he passed her just in season to catch her final words. "Taken by itself, your phrase implies that there was one of your stories that *Harper's* did take; but unfortunately we all know better."

"Or worse," she corrected him audaciously. Then she turned back again to the bearded man she had addressed as *Pater*. "No matter now about the picture," she said, with an impatient disregard of his interests which betrayed her extreme and downright youth; "but I do wish you'd tell me why you say I don't belong in this."

For a long minute, his steady, kindly eyes moved to and fro about the room, pausing on Dickie, now threatening Tony with the spoon, pausing on Dickie's sister who, thimbleless, was deftly sewing a button to the sleeve of her companion's coat. Then his gaze came back to Dorcas, alert, intent, and fearless, — came back and rested there.

"They are too irresponsible for you," he said briefly.

She knitted her arching brows in sudden disapproval.

"Irresponsibility is at once a talent and a duty," she made sententious answer.

He shook his head.

"Like most brief utterances, Dorcas, that sounds a good deal better than it really is," he told her. "However, if you care for pithy truth, I'll try to give you the present situation in a nutshell. These others know that they are playing at life; you think that you are living."

"Are n't we all?" she questioned, as her brown eyes looked straight up into the friendly ones above her.

"Not in the same way. Dickie is a pianist, because he thinks it's the easiest way for him to make his bread and butter; Eleanor paints for the same laudable reason. But you —"

"And I try to write," she interrupted, with a smile.

Regardless of her smile, he looked down at her fixedly, his straight brows drawn together in his effort to find and use the proper words.

"I said *but*, not *and*," he corrected her. "You do try to write. It is n't for the sake of the loaves and fishes, though, but for the thing that lies behind it all, the feeling that you've got it in you to make your life to count."

"But they have it, too," she demurred loyally.

"Not a bit of it. Offer Dickie an annuity of fifty thousand; give Eleanor the chance at a rich husband, and then see how far their artistic zeal will carry them!"

"For shame, Pater!" And her face added force to her words.

"Fact, though," he told her coolly. "But, mind you, I don't put you in the same class."

Her answer was a little sullen.

"I don't see why not."

"Because you've more inside you, child. That's why I want to get you out of this galley."

She drew down her own arching brows in unconscious imitation of his own favourite expression.

"But I belong here," she said perversely.

His contradiction was prompt.

"You are frittering away your time, and your money, and your nervous system," he made deliberate answer.

Her own answer was a little bit appealing.

"What would you have me do, Pater?"

"I would have you go home and live there like a civilized woman," he assured her roughly.

Her colour came, then faded, leaving her face wan and white. Under the sudden wanness, he was startled to see the blue veins in her temples swell and throb.

"I have n't any home but this, Pater," she replied gently.

"No; but you might have had," he said, like all men dogged in sticking to his point.

His random words struck home. Once more the colour

rose in her cheeks and stained the skin about the roots of her bright brown hair.

"Yes, perhaps," she admitted. "Still — Well, I chose this life, instead."

"Why?" The question came like a blow from the flat of an open hand.

"Because I wanted to write."

"Why?"

"Because I — I wanted to find some way to express myself," she answered slowly.

Under his thick brown beard, his lips smiled quizzically.

"Dorcas child," he told her gently; "when you have seen as many years as I, when you have seen as many inspirations fade away just a little bit ahead of you, or else turn to dreary mediocrity in your hands: when that day comes, child, you'll begin to wonder whether, after all, your neighbour may not be as well worth expressing as you are, yourself."

Her eyes upon the shabby carpet at her feet, Dorcas pondered. Then she looked up to meet his eyes.

"It sounds a lot more generous, Pater, more generous and more practical; but I'm not altogether sure it goes with what I, what we all, mean by Art."

Once more he smiled.

"Your Art will never be artistic, Dorcas, until you learn to spell it with a little letter."

"Dorcas!" The cry from across the room cut in upon the hush that followed. "Oh, Dorcas, bunny's done. Bring on your plates, before he gets coagulated."

But Dorcas lingered for yet another word.

"Granted you're right, Pater, how does one go to work to learn it?" she asked, with a gravity strangely oblivious of the mirth around them.

"Only by living and working," he made answer. "That is why I hate it: the wasting your time, playing at life like this."

Once more she surprised him. This time, it was by her

vehemence, as she brought her clasped hands forward, downward, as if sweeping aside his words.

"This is my life, Pater. It is here that I must make good, that I shall make good. Only give me time to prove it to you."

"It depends a little on what you mean by making good," he answered.

She flung her own answer back at him from over her shoulder.

"Merely making some word of mine help on the world a very little," she said hotly. "Else, what's the good of being born?" Then, without another word, she joined the others.

"It was a good bunny," Dickie observed later, from above his empty plate. "I made him, too."

"The creative instinct is strong within us all, Dickie," Pater remarked, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Moreover, like all young creators, you found your work extremely good."

"From the look of your own trencher, you agreed with me," Dickie asserted, from his place at the head of the room, for, in consideration of his burned finger, he had been appointed master of ceremonies. "Hang it all, Pater, you need n't be so top-loftical. Granted the merits of the output, I don't see why cheese may not be as noble a medium as oils. It's far less blobby, while you're at it."

"By the way, Dorcas," another voice broke in; "now that we've used up all the ale left over from the rabbit in drinking the health of the misguided editor who accepted your story, would you mind coming down to minor details, and telling us why the elephant?"

Dorcas glanced up at the gray cloth beast that occupied the place of honour on the mantel-piece, his paws and trunk extended in mute appeal for friendly nursing, and his wisp of a fringed tail trailing forward from between his hind legs.

"That?" She smiled as caressingly at the ungainly toy as if a responsive heart had throbbed within the broadcloth carcass. "That is Buddha."

"Buddha?"

"Yes, transmogrified to suit the dictates of my income. My outgo, rather," she hastily corrected herself, with a little grimace. "I sighed for a bronze Buddha; it's a decent sort of property for a would-be writer to start his intellectual housekeeping with. Unfortunately, Vantine and I disagreed about the market value of bronze, so I hunted up the nearest toy shop and bought the elephant, instead. After all, granted the name and the creed, the rest does n't matter much."

Pater looked up sharply.

"What do you want of his creed, Dorcas, you of all people?" he asked her.

All the mocking fun died out of her voice and face, as she turned to him in answer.

"'All existence is suffering,'" she quoted gravely; "'but the cause of pain is desire.' What's more, Pater, constructed as I am within me, I shall have to go through a good many modifying existences, before I can settle down to long for the attainment of my Nirvana."

And Pater, listening, watching, could not do otherwise than agree.

CHAPTER THREE

"DICKIE," Dorcas told him, one winter day; "my inkpot has lost its cunning."

Dickie answered with his mouth full, for they were drinking afternoon tea.

"Did n't know it ever had found it," he made callous answer.

"It had, sporadically." Dorcas surveyed her repast with thoughtful eyes, too intent upon her subject to heed the flabbiness of toast made slowly and by a fish-tail burner. "I had a story accepted — fiction, I mean; I don't talk journalese yet — and then a joke. The joke paid better than the story, too."

"It might have been more spontaneous," Dickie suggested.

"It was," Dorcas told him dryly. "I made it, the first night after the landlady became strident concerning the rent."

Dickie helped himself to more tea. Then he nodded.

"I know, old chap. I've been that way, myself," he said consolingly. "But since the joke: what then? Have you had some more things accepted?"

She shook her head.

"No; but I've had quarts of them rejected," she made despondent answer.

Dickie cast about in his mind in search of consolation. When he found it, however, it did not seem to him especially adequate. Nevertheless, he presented it for what it was worth.

"At least, it shows you had the grit to keep on trying."

She turned upon him with an irritability to which, afore-time, she had been a stranger.

"What would you have me do? Sit down and starve?" she asked him shortly.

"Oh, it would n't ever come to that, you know," Dickie sought to reassure her.

His optimism irritated her yet more.

"One must eat, and even have an occasional carfare, Dickie. A single joke does n't pay for many weeks of that."

"There was the story, too," he persisted.

She let her clasped hands fall on the edge of the table.

"Not at all," she answered.

"You said they accepted it. In fact, you had us all to supper, on the strength of it," he reminded her.

"Acceptance is n't always pay," she explained, and her voice was dreary.

Dickie rose. He felt that her tears were not remote enough for his perfect comfort. Moreover, there had flashed upon him the man's explanation of her mood, the man's unflinching cure.

"Dorcas," he said; "you're hungry. Come out and feed."

She forced herself to smile, as she pointed to the teapot.

"Are n't we feeding now?" she queried.

Dickie's reply was accurate, albeit a bit profane.

"Slops!" he said, and he qualified the noun.

Her colour came.

"You are n't especially polite to my hospitality," she answered.

"The hospitality is all right; it's the form it takes that I loathe," Dickie told her bluntly. "You need grub, Dorcas, man grub, meaty grub. It would put new pluck into your heart, and new cunning into your inkpot. Instead, you sit here and absorb stewed tea and soggy toast. It ties knots in your nerves, and, in the fulness of time, it also will tie knots in your digestion. Worst of all, it will knock your

work to smithereens. No chap can work, unless he has plenty of beef and air and exercise. Come for a tramp, and then we'll pick up Bert, and go off somewhere and feed."

"How is Bertha?" Dorcas asked, by way of creating a diversion. Not for worlds would she have allowed Dickie to know how his plan was tempting her, Dickie whose slender and intermittent income could barely supply himself with beef, let alone a sister. As for a friend, however grateful, she could be nothing, after all, except a rank outsider.

"She's all right; she always is. Plucky little beggar, too." Dickie's eyes shone at the thought of his sister.

Like her irritability, Dorcas's sensitiveness was the product of the past few months. It came to the surface now, in the quick way she appropriated Dickie's words as a rebuke to herself.

"I'm sorry I'm so in the dumps, Dickie," she offered apology.

Dickie eyed her in momentary despair. Meekness did not belong to his idea of Dorcas Sloane. Then he asserted himself once more.

"Hang the dumps, and come and feed!" he ordered her masterfully. "It's what you need, more than anything else."

But Dorcas held back.

"Sorry, Dickie; but I can't."

"Why not?"

Dorcas hesitated between the two well-worn excuses in one of which womankind, cornered, invariably takes refuge. She was prudent enough to choose the one less palpably untrue.

"I've an engagement in half an hour. Really, it's time I was dressing now."

Dickie rose to his feet.

"Why did n't you tell me I was hindering you, then?" he demanded just a little huffily. "Good bye, then, and —" But at the door he hung back, turned, once more faced

Dorcas, this time with his hand outstretched. "Hang it all, Dorcas," he said; "our little crowd is bound to stand by each other. If you ever find yourself getting in a hole, you'll let —" he caught his breath; then, because he was a gentleman; "Bert know."

And Dorcas promised. Once again, however, as she did so, she admitted to herself that promises such as that were never really binding.

It was less than a month since Dorcas's successful rabbit party, and already a reaction had set in. Her gloves and her shoes were getting shabby; her Doulton teapot had a broken nose, and her bank account was dwindling fast. Her efforts at work were proving futile, and Bohemia was coming upon her nerves. For the time being, Nirvana seemed rather an alluring vision. Dorcas, left alone and forgetful of her hypothetical engagement, let her hands fall into her lap and closed her eyes, as she gave a weary little sigh. Whatever one's ideals, it was by no means always easy to work out one's own salvation. As for self-expression, though, asked just then, Dorcas could have achieved it easily, tersely and in simple Saxon. It is in fiction, not in real life, that one curses Fate in polysyllables. As for Nirvana, she hoped it would be warm and light, and that the boots of its inhabitants would not have chilly, clammy spots of thinness in the exact middle of the soles.

The whimsical hope aroused her. Opening her eyes, she unbuttoned her shoes and replaced them with a shabby pair of bronze slippers, frayed remnant of her student opulence. Then she pulled out a little yellow book from beneath the cushion where she had poked it when Dickie's well-known knock had smitten on her door. It was her bank book, and she frowned, as she glared down upon its unoffending pages. She shut it with a snap and tossed it on the table. It had been balanced, only the day before, so there was no especial reason to doubt its accuracy. However, any study of it would be useless and depressing. Much better let her energy

expend itself upon the frayed hem of her brown cheviot skirt. The lines between her brows were plainly visible, while she was hunting for her thimble, and for the brown spool that ought to have been in the left-hand corner of the drawer.

She found the spool at last where Dickie had left it, tied to the tail of the elephant who sat and smiled down at her from his shelf. The feminine longing to pet something, even an inanimate something, caused her to pat his broadcloth side caressingly and then to draw her fingers down along his trunk. Then, spool in hand, she sat down to the joint consideration of the hem and of the present outlook. According to a recently developed custom, she considered it aloud.

"It's bad, Buddha, very bad," she remarked, as she drew off a needleful of bright brown silk. "I've got it in me to succeed, way in me. The only trouble is, I can't seem to get it out. If I were starting in life again, I'd throw over any ideals of success in literature, and devote my whole attention to the development of a psychological dredge. There's a fortune buried in it, Buddha. The only trouble is, it's like my hidden germ of genius: nobody knows enough to get it out."

She fell silent for a moment, while she rolled the tip of silk between her fingers, poked it into the needle's eye, nipped it daintily in her nails and slowly drew it through. That done, she let her hands fall inertly into her lap, and spoke again.

"Bohemia is disappointing, Buddha; or else, this is n't the real thing. I supposed it would be altogether charming, granted one used a chafing dish and smelly cheese, and talked about ART. But even Oka palls in time, and ART gets to be a bore, when it's all theory and not fact. Good gracious, Buddha!" She sat up straight, and her brown eyes snapped suddenly. "I'm not lazy. I'd be willing to work like any dog; it's only that there seems to be nothing to work at. There's ink enough, and pens are cheap. The trouble is that everybody has said it all before me, and, what's worse,

said it a whole lot better than I could ever do, if I worked nine thousand years."

She shut her teeth, and again the vertical lines, shadows no longer, came into view between her arching brows. Then, without troubling herself to remove her skirt, she folded back the hem until it lay across her knees and, picking up her needle, began to sew.

Like many modern girls, Dorcas Sloane had not the slightest talent for self deceit. In her somewhat fragmentary utterances addressed to Buddha's broadcloth effigy, she had summed up the situation perfectly, in so far as it concerned herself. She still felt sure of her own innate ability; given the chance to work, she would be ready and willing to work to the verge of exhaustion, over the verge, perhaps. But, in the mean time, Bohemia as she was seeing it was proving a good deal of a disappointment.

In her original plans of life, Bohemia had figured largely, just as, in those same plans, she had magnified a certain deft use of words into a literary genius which could not fail to bring forth ripe and rosy fruit, given the proper soil. And Bohemia would be that soil. To be sure, her ideal Bohemia, born of sundry stray suppers at the Rose Tree Inn, nourished on improbable novels and equally improbable tales told by returning alumnae, had been a country where every genius won his due meed of prompt appreciation; where people worked by night and slept by day and dressed in clinging fabrics culled from the bargain counters of the art shops; where ink and paint and ivory keys or catgut strings were the only tools worthy of recognition; where meals were served at all hours, and toothsome delicacies sufficient for the entire colony simmered within the limits of a three-pint chafing dish. Of such small matters as rent and the half-soling of her boots, Dorcas took no heed. Those were as inevitable as was the cordial, smiling editor who gave her fatherly admonition, the while he ordered her next manuscript but one.

And now, instead of all that, there was the ebbing bank account, the fraying hem of her stout old cheviot gown, and the irate landlady who talked at her on the stairs. As for the editor of her young visions, a camel could wriggle through a needle's eye far more successfully than could an unknown, shabby damsel like herself make her appealing way into the editorial Presence.

As she lifted her head from threading her needle for the second time, Dorcas spoke out again.

"No use, Buddha!" she said sternly. "I won't give up, and you know it."

Then she attacked her skirt anew.

That was the worst of Dorcas; she would not give up. Half-despairing, she was yet indomitable. In part, this came from the girl's sure conviction that she had it in her, somewhere, somehow, to make good; in part, it came from her merciful ignorance of the vast throng of just such other girls who are clinging to existence and their own ideals in the great, pitiless city, of the ugly abyss that lies before so many of them. Happily for Dorcas Sloane, she could walk upon the very verge of this abyss without being in the least aware of its existence. She was curiously short-sighted in the direction of the things she loathed.

As for her making good, as she phrased it, it had been merely because literature lay along the line of least resistance that, long ago, she had chosen it as her means of what, in her more ardent moments, she termed her needed self-expression. Nine hours a day spent at a piano or before a smudgy charcoal drawing seemed to her a far less alluring way of achieving proper technique than was lying in a deck chair in the sun, reading Jane Austen, and Richardson, and Henry James, or even Hawthorne. She had kept a diary ever since her little childhood; she had manufactured verses since her earliest years, and one small Christmas story had gone indirectly from her pen to the composing-room of the weekly paper published in her grandmother's home town.

Moreover, she possessed no one near enough of kin to have the right to fritter away her time and talent by endless discussion of Jimmy's croup and Sallie's summer petticoats. Her life was quite in her own hands. She would proceed to work out all its problems and set the resultant statements down in ink.

It never had occurred to Dorcas to doubt it that an eager crowd awaited those same statements, never had occurred to her to suspect that they had all been worked out before, not once, but scores of times. The arrogance of youth was still upon her. She was not one of a class; but an individual and, as such, a possible forerunner of a type. Just how the type could be achieved she did not stop to question. Instead, she bent her energies to the task of turning herself inside out, and then of writing down prolixly the things that she discovered there.

She had gone to New York in late June. Early August found her in cheap lodgings well to the west of Washington Square, wearing her last-year frocks and eating casually at white-fronted restaurants, while she wondered whether it was that all the really critical editors were out of town, or whether there might be something a little wrong in the point of view she had taken in describing her self-contained discoveries. It was easier to prove the second question than the first. She once more turned herself inside out; once more set herself to catalogue the traits she found within. The first time, she had done it in a chatty, effervescent essay. The second attempt clothed itself in the robes of gloomy fiction.

The second effort was no more successful than the first had been. For her third trial, Dorcas undoubtedly would have chosen lyric form. Fortunately, however, in the meantime she had fallen in with Dickie's sister, whom she had adored in her own freshman year, and, still more fortunately, with Dickie; and Dickie had dissuaded her.

"Poetry belongs to geniuses and fools," he told her succinctly. "You are n't either one, so let it alone."

"But I must do something," she urged.

His head upon one side, Dickie eyed her meditatively.

"Best not," he said, after an interval.

"Why not?" she protested.

"No good. Just wastes ink and frazzles your nerves."

"What shall I do, then?" she asked him, too helplessly intent upon getting his advice to heed the narrow dimensions of the circle around which she was floundering.

"Go home and live in the country, and buy a great, big dog. By the time you've taught him not to eat your neighbour's chickens and your own best boots, you'll be too tired to ponder on your oversoul and set your ponderings down in common metre."

"But —" Dorcas hesitated. Then her innate honesty came to the surface. "But I like to ponder on it, Dickie."

"Exactly. That's the woman of you. Likewise, that's what keeps you women from doing any better work. Nobody cares a hang about your oversoul, except as it matches up here and there with some crossgrained streak in his own. It's generally the next man's soul that's worth consideration; but, for heaven's sake, when you have considered it all you are going to, don't serve it up to us in verse."

"Why not?"

Dickie shut his teeth, for he was on one of his hobbies now, and very much in earnest.

"Baby work," he said curtly from between his teeth. "Give us a novel, or nothing. One decent sonata is worth a dozen sloppy little songs." Then he digressed sharply. "Dorcas, you remind me of a fellow that I knew in college, Gordon Coit."

She looked up in surprise, and Dickie, watching, noted the sudden alertness of her face.

"Gordon Coit!"

"Yes. Know him?"

"I've met him. He had a cousin in my class."

Dickie dashed off at an unexpected tangent.

"Ever see his father?"

"Yes." Dorcas bent down to tie her shoe with fingers that were not wholly steady.

"Wonderful old chap! Wonderful!" Dickie burst out. "I never saw such hair and eyes. I never saw so old a man so boyish, either. He was everlastingly dropping down on Cambridge, and it was hard to tell which was the more popular, he or Gordon. I say!" Dickie broke off abruptly.

"Yes?" But the girl's voice dragged a little.

"There's your chance. Give us a study of an oversoul like that, if it's an oversoul you want. I'll bet you money you won't find one better worth the working."

There came a little pause. Then Dorcas smiled faintly.

"No, Dickie," she assented. "Perhaps I won't."

To-day, all of a sudden, the talk flashed back upon her. It was all so like Dickie in its strange medley of slang and sage advice, its sudden dropping of the main theme in order to rush madly off upon a cadenza of pure personal enthusiasm. And, in the very end, it had been Dickie, dear old Dickie, the scatter-brained, the irresponsible, who had paid full tribute to the ingrained nobility of Leonard Coit.

Only six months before! Dropping her needle, the girl clasped her hands across her eyes, as if to shut out the incongruity of her present surroundings, while she thought of this man whose only wish had been to take her life into his strong, wise hands. She had refused him absolutely, utterly. Her life was hers, her very own, hers to make or to mar at will. And, in these six months, what had she done to mar it or to make it?

Behind her clasped hands, her brain leaped swiftly to and fro, ranging in order the elements which had gone to the framing of those past six months: the shabby room, the casual meals, the wearing toil to accomplish work which in the end proved futile, the close comradeship of a round dozen friends, all shabby, all more or less futile, all loyal and irre-

sponsible and full of buoyant hopes for a future which always lay just beyond their grasp. And, in contrast to these elements, exciting, stimulating, restless, rose the single quiet figure of a white-haired man, awaiting her with smiling eyes and open hands.

The picture which, months before, she had resolutely put away, face to her memory's blankest wall, attracted her, allured her. Now that she had brought it out once more, she gazed upon it long and hungrily. While she gazed, she felt her moral fibre yielding to the quiet invitation of those extended hands. And then all at once something snapped into place within her, and again she stiffened to her old resolve, her old surety that, deep down within herself, there lay the possibility of personal achievement, of snatching for herself some little edge of dreamed-of fame. Granted the possibility, she must dismiss her dreams and show a single-minded perseverance in working out her end.

"Come in!" She blinked at the lights, as she dropped her hands and turned to face the opening door.

"It's a letter. I thought it might be a check, and, in that case —" The landlady's voice was a compromise between wheedling and vindictiveness.

Dorcas whitened, as she took the letter. She recognized the writing. Then she turned to the woman waiting at her side.

"This is no check," she said. "Besides, it is not necessary to remind me that I am behind on the rent. I will pay you, when I can. Till then —" Her glance at the open door ended the sentence more expressively than any words could do.

Left alone, she opened the letter. It was short.

"Dearest," it ran; "my life is so terribly empty, and you could fill it so very full, with all that you have to give. And so I am asking you for yourself, asking you all over again. Dear, now that I have known you, I am very lonely here in the old home."

That was all.

There came an instant's silence. An instant later, the fragments of the letter had fluttered to the floor.

A long hour afterward, Dorcas was still sewing on the cheviot skirt.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two weeks later, in deference to the increasing arrogance of her landlady and to the decreasing figures of her bank account, Dorcas decided that it would be wise to change the place of her abode.

Her new quarters were a little farther west and a good deal farther to the north. They took her away from the spots where Dickie and his jovial comrades were most likely to foregather; and she missed them all acutely, Dickie in particular. The whimsical fashion in which he uttered home truths, not always encouraging or complimentary, had endeared him to the heart of Dorcas. She missed his dropping in for tea or of an evening; she missed the cheerful hail which met her from some by-street when Dickie, his music roll under his arm and his fists in his pockets, came swinging towards her, to fall into step beside her and delight her ears with stories of his last, worst pupil. Dickie's sister she had accepted as a fellow Smith alumna, and she was quite willing to take her nobler qualities on trust. Dickie and Dorcas had been chums at sight, chums in a healthy, wholesale fashion which forbade the thought of any tenderer relation.

Dorcas's removal from the central point of Dickie's radii would have been atoned for, in part at least, by the fact that the change brought her close to the studio of Pater, had not Pater been such a busy man that chances to play with him were rare. Pater, in the vernacular of his class, had not exactly arrived, but he was slated on the schedules of the next year but two or three. His studies of black tree trunks against the pale green shimmer of spring leafage already

had caused some comment in one or two of the minor exhibitions. They had been poked away into inconspicuous corners; but the critics had discovered them even there, had commented on them, had predicted better things to come. Moreover, they had sold, and an extra order or two had even followed after the exhibition. Pater inevitably was scheduled to arrive.

How far his financial standing aided his arrival, it would be unorthodox to say. Plain living may make for high thinking and higher execution, granted that the plainness be nutritious; but no great succession of masterpieces ever was evolved from a diet of skimmed milk and graham biscuits. The fires of genius must be stoked and banked. The artist must be freed from desperate temptation to turn on the drafts to boil the pot with the first red blaze, instead of waiting till the flame is blue. Pater, viewed by the eye of the general public, was a poor man. Pater, judged by the standards of the friends with whom he lived and worked, was plutocratic. At any rate, however, he had been able to await his own good time.

Pater, in a less gentle class of youngsters, would have been known as *Daddy*, but never as *The Old Man*. He was older than the rest of them; his point of view, as compared with theirs, was distinctively old-fashioned, as old-fashioned as the thick brown beard which covered his shapely chin, as old-fashioned as the precision of his dress, which never sought to flaunt forth the secret of his calling. His nickname, lovingly, almost tenderly, given him by Dickie, depended not so much on this, however, as on the inherent fatherliness of Pater's point of view. When he could spend time to leave his studio, he betook himself in search of Dickie or some others of the clan, nominally to play with them, really to stand by and smoke and beam upon them with his kindly eyes, while he listened to their record of petty success or dismal failure, administering praise or pity as the case might need. Now and then, not too often, he roused himself at the

recital of some trivial detail, and launched forth a denunciation, brief, but terrific while it lasted. Then he went back into his studio, picked up his brushes and fell to work, humming softly to himself, the while, as he wondered vaguely whether an old chap like himself was not bound to do more harm than good by all his little lectures. But the young chaps went their way, sobered, knowing better.

From the start, Pater had looked on Dorcas with curious, though friendly, eyes. She was of different stuff from the others. Pater shrewdly suspected that, although her talent for work might not be one half so great, her talent for life, for getting to the real heart and core of things, was immeasurably greater. Where the others would skim, she would delve. And the result of her delving? He shook his head. The bed-rock of life is not reached with unbent, haughty neck, with unfurrowed brows; it is not touched with dainty fingers. One must bow down to reach it, must grip it strongly, harshly, with rough hands and, mayhap, bleeding nails. And, worst of all, once it is grasped, one never quite lets go again. One rarely seeks it for the sake of the reward; seeking it thus, he never, never finds it. It is in some few natures to demand it; that is all. Pater suspected that Dorcas was among those few.

Regarding the talents of Dorcas, Pater had singularly few hallucinations. He had seen her type before, the cocksure college graduate who believes that her facile use of ink will straightway land herself among the immortals, her output in the anthologies of *The World's Best Literature*. His only hope for Dorcas was that she would give it up in time, before the smoke and dust of unavailing toil had smudged her glowing youth. That she would give it up at once, he felt no particle of hope. It takes a little while to live down a firm belief in one's own genius in any given direction. Pater, smoking and thinking about Dorcas, smiled grimly to himself as he recalled his own ecstasy in certain portraits he had done. Viewed in a most forgiving light, they were as vital as the figures in a haberdasher's window, as vital, but not one

half so pretty. Yet not even in his sanest hours could Pater quite accept the surety that his greatest work would never lie in portraiture. He scorned his ink-black tree trunks amid the sunny leafage, and flung himself in ever-increasing fury upon the problem of expressing the inmost human soul in dabs of red and yellow and sickly hues of violet. After all, was not poor little Dorcas doing about the same thing? Her talent was for living, for making the people around her happy and contented, even for inspiring them a little bit along the path towards ideal things. Instead, she had cut herself off from her fellow men, had come down to New York to starve in lodgings and write trash about things of which she lacked even the slightest comprehension.

Poor little soul! And she had looked tired, last time they had met. By the way, Dickie, meeting him in the street, the other day, had mentioned that she had moved into less expensive quarters. Poor child! So it had come to that, already. Pater puffed hard, thought harder. After all, though, there was nothing he could do about it, short of bribing an editor to pay for the privilege of throwing her trash into his waste basket, and that would only delay the inevitable end, not prevent it. Not all of Pater's liking for Dorcas Sloane could blind him to what was bound to overtake her. However, when it did overtake her, he felt assured that she would take her medicine at a gulp, and bravely. Meanwhile? If she had been younger, he would have invested in a doll and a packet of candy. That failing, he would try opera, by way of consolation. He flung aside the end of his cigar and sought the columns of the daily paper.

Dorcas, meanwhile, was devoting the long, wet evening to a story concerning a shipwreck in the southern seas. Dorcas had never been on any ship larger than an Annex ferry; her knowledge of southern seas was limited to a hazy theory that they held atolls and simooms, although which of them was what, surpassed the limits of her learning. However, somebody had told her that southern seas and shipwrecks

always commanded a good sale. Moreover, they afforded place for a mutilated hero, and a heroine who could be dishevelled without turning too blue and shivery. The most destructive touch upon the art of Dorcas Sloane lay in her insistent habit of keeping probabilities in full, and oftentimes unlovely, view.

Buddha, his trunk bent slightly awry by reason of a hasty packing, sat on top of the bookcase and smirked down at her and at the inky pages scattered over the table. Unfailingly neat in other respects, Dorcas was not tidy with the pen. When she could think of things to say, she splashed them down with ferocious haste; when she could not, she sat and drew purblind and angular pigs in all the margins. Then she smudged out the pigs with her little finger, and struggled with her punctuation points. Once, in being ushered out past the open door of a certain well-known sanctum, she had heard a rumbling voice uplifted in hot wrath.

"Damn that woman's everlasting semicolons!" the voice said.

And Dorcas, speeding on her way, resolved to take the lesson to her heart. It seemed likely to be her only peep behind a lifted corner of the professional veil. She would gain from it all the light she could.

Aside from the bookcase and the bed, both owned by Dorcas, there was not much of anything in the room. To be sure, the landlady had dwelt with some insistence upon the wardrobe, a vast triangular sarcophagus-thing of black walnut, nailed fast to the corner where the best light would have fallen on the table. The angles of the wardrobe reduced one's frocks into unseemly wisps of twisty wrinkles; the open middle space would have been good for nothing in the world but a pile of old-fashioned round muff boxes. However, the door was panelled, and the pressed beading of its Gothic sham front was surmounted by the motto *Welcome*, worked out in Berlin wools on a perforated card.

Across the room was a white iron bed, its brass knobs thriftily dangling from bits of string tied to the footrail, ready for the mending day which never came. The footrail itself was broken. The break was speciously covered by an irrelevant pink bow; but Dorcas had discovered it, the first night, when she was trying to read herself to sleep by the single unshaded bulb that dangled from the exact middle of the room. Incidentally, she discovered that linoleum, however aged, is an unyielding surface to receive one's head. Of course, there were a bureau and a meagre washstand, both minus a good share of their varnish. The one possessed a cracked and curly mirror; the other bore a broken-nosed magenta jug set in a basin of violent, vivid blue. However, next to the wardrobe and the electric lighting, it was upon the lace curtains and the statues that the landlady prided herself most justly. The curtains were a curious medley of flying doves and praying Samuels; and the statues, nine of them and all freshly gilded, leered cynically down on Dorcas from above the upper margin of the *Welcome*. Dorcas had looked up at them and shuddered. Then she had burst into hysterical laughter which had left her teary, but manifestly the better for the paroxysm. Later, she dubbed them the Muses, and came to look upon them with a superstitious reverence, second only to that which she bestowed upon the elephantine Buddha.

The house itself, quite plainly, was the work of an optimist, of a firm believer in the universal brotherhood of man. Furthermore, he had assumed it as a part of his working creed that the members of the brotherhood should possess insatiate interest in each other's doings. The thinness of the partitions went in proof of this, no less than did the connecting doors between the rooms, doors whose generous marginal cracks allowed the brotherly spirit to percolate at will. Dorcas's left-hand brother appeared to take it out in nicotine, and to be suffering from permanent insomnia, if one might judge from the thick blue clouds which, all night long,

came floating, curling towards her from around the casing. Worst of all, he economized, not in the quantity, but in the quality, of his supplies.

"But, after all, what can you expect of the creature?" Dorcas explained violently to Dickie and his sister who had dropped in, one day, to find her standing on a chair, a roll of cotton batting in one hand, a paper knife in the other. "He's the sort of man that carries his handkerchief in his cuff. You'd know he'd be doing just this thing." And the knife attacked the cracks with vigour.

To-night, however, it was wet outside and the air was heavy, so that the smoke, creeping in around the cotton, seemed weighing down on Dorcas like a depressing cloud. It sickened her, and it rasped her nerves. Her story went more and more haltingly; the throng of pigs increased, and the commas were more and more insistently inked over, until, at last, the girl flung down her pen and buried her face in her hands. It was with a sense of relief that she heard the strident voice of the landlady, summoning her to the telephone.

"It's a man's voice, too," the landlady made wholly superfluous addition to the summons. "Not the young feller that was here, last week; this one sounds a good deal older and more settled."

Dorcas stiffened herself. Then she relaxed the stiffening. After all, what was the use? It was part of one great whole, part and parcel of the praying Samuels and the broken-nosed magenta jug. Why cavil at one part and accept the rest? She shut her teeth and went down the four flights of stairs leading to the telephone. Her teeth unshut themselves again, though, when she heard Pater's friendly voice come booming in along the wire.

"I feel," Dorcas observed contentedly, next night; "as if I were once more munching at the bread of life."

Pater, starchy and immaculate, his brown beard shining with its careful grooming and his neatly parted hair far less

picturesque than his usual shock of tousled waves, looked down at her with manifest approval. However much fine raiment might take from the dignity of his own appearance and dwarf him to the likeness of too many other men, it certainly was becoming to Dorcas Sloane. Her head rose proudly from the neck of her gown which opened just enough to show the tiny beads encircling her slim throat, and the coils of her bright hair, piled high above, caught the lights around them and gleamed with the same tint as the eyes and brows below, the tint of ripened chestnuts shining in the October sun. The girl was beautiful, that night, and vivid as a bit of flame. Blind to the fact that, in these later weeks, evenings like this were rare in her experience, Pater discounted the happiness as cause for her increase of beauty, and laid it solely to the clothes. A feminine eye, however, and one more critical of detail, would have told Pater that the clinging limpness of the frock was the result of age, not art; that the beads were glass, not pearl; and that each motion of the small gloved hands sent out upon the air a faint, faint whiff of gasoline. And Pater, hearing, would have smiled and said, —

“Oh, go to thunder! I know a picture, when I see it.”

What he did say, however, was more conventional.

“You like it?”

“I adore it!” Dorcas, like a happy child, gave a little jiggle of sheer rapture, by way of adding emphasis to her words.

“Even to the point of being resigned to the fact that I could n’t get seats for *Carmen*?” he persisted.

Then he drew back, startled at the flashing of her eyes.

“*Carmen*!” she said. “And this!”

Pater smiled, as he studied the mobile face, applauding, the while, the girlish frankness of her nature which bade her to speak out her unfashionable choice. *Carmen* was being sung, that night, by such a galaxy of stars that, try as he would, Pater had been unable to coax out of the box office the pair

of tickets upon which his heart was set. However, his heart had also been set upon the plan of hearing some sort of music, that night, with Dorcas by his side. *Carmen* failing, he had gone to the extreme opposite end of the musical world, and had taken seats for one of the most modern of the oratorios, conducted by its own composer.

"It's good of its kind," he told Dorcas; "astoundingly good. Moreover, it is n't so bad for us, now and then, to sit face to face with a creator and his masterpiece. It helps us to realize the apparently impossible fact that an occasional masterpiece may be within the limits of a modern, human man. We'll go; and, what's more, we'll envy him. Envy sometimes proves to be rather stimulating to one's higher nature, so long as the work that calls it forth is n't done with your own particular kind of tools. In that case, it merely causes one to swear and hide his diminished head."

And Dorcas agreed with him in the end, although for the hour she was losing all consciousness of self, all envy and all personal ambition, in the wonderful *Allegro* that came crashing down upon them from choir and orchestra, —

*Stant Syon atria
Conjubilantia,
Martyre plena.*

in the consciousness that out from the brain of the nonchalant figure, swinging his baton to and fro before her eyes, had surged this mighty mass of harmony which filled her, thrilled her, quickened her insight into the workings of the universe that lay around her, into the hopes and dreams and heart-throbs of even the least of its creatures. She analyzed nothing, she envied nothing; she only knew that they all seemed better worth the while: Dickie and herself and Pater, her work, and even the new boarding-house. They all were parts of the one great thing that, in some way or other, had taken shape in this.

The theme had changed. It grew slower at first, and more

impressive; but by degrees it quickened and gathered force and fire, until the hot, white air seemed quivering with a joyousness too great for silence, a joyousness which insisted upon being heard and echoed of all men, as it went climbing high and ever higher in wave on wave of exultant ecstasy, —

*Regis ibi thronus,
Agminis et sonus,
Est epulantis.*

the song of supernal feasting, as joyous as it was free from earthly dross of drunkenness or danger.

Dorcas repeated the words dreamily, as she followed Pater to a table in the restaurant where he had elected to eat supper.

"How commonplace it sounds in here, before the literal fact!" she added slowly. "Wait till to-morrow, Pater, before you ask me what I think about it. It's not a thing to discuss inside of four walls."

Pater laughed. Then obediently he left the music undiscussed. Instead, —

"Dorcas, you see that man over in the corner?" he asked, as he drew back her chair. "The one with the shock of red hair, I mean. He sat close to us, to-night, and I spent half the evening, wishing I dared ask him to sit for me. I'd paint him as Saint Paul, red hair and all."

"Why?" Dorcas spoke idly. It was plain that the red-haired man did not interest her in the very least.

"'Evil was present with me,'" Pater quoted; and something, either his thought of the man or the recollection of the music, was making him very grave.

"You know him, then?"

Pater nodded, as he turned to give the order. Then, —

"We went to school together," he said briefly. "It seemed to me that he only escaped perfection by being endowed with a congenital curse. Even as it is, he is one of the most lovable men I know. Strange," Pater spoke thoughtfully, as he

filled Dorcas's glass, then his own; "how the Creative hand seems to bungle, every now and then!"

A half-hour later, while Dorcas and Pater still lingered over their festive little supper, the red-haired man rose and turned to leave the room. As he passed them, he gave to Pater a nod of hearty good-fellowship. An instant afterward, Dorcas lowered her eyes before his intent and rather questioning scrutiny.

CHAPTER FIVE

"WHAT an awful misfit your name is, Dickie!" Dorcas made thoughtful observation.

Dickie smiled down at her from over his shoulder. Knife in hand, he was taking his turn at the cotton and the cracks, for his sister had been complaining that the unsuppressible fumes of cheap tobacco added a disagreeable flavour to the tea.

"It's all the fault of destiny which has cut me off with a minor part in things," he told Dorcas cheerily. "My sponsors in baptism slated me as hero. Every good romance has its *Dickie*, as surely as it has its love affair. In fact, the last page usually proves them to have been synonymous terms, from the very first. Also, if you notice, *Dickies* never smile; they invariably grin."

"Even under existing circumstances?" his sister queried. "Dorcas, this place is awful; it's sure to undermine your constitution."

Dorcas lifted the cover of the kettle and peered in. It was increasingly characteristic of her, this impatience which forbade her to await the promissory puff of steam. Dickie rebuked her swiftly.

"Dorcas, that is the seventh time you have taken off that cover. You may think it hurries up the boiling; but it does n't. It delays it, every last time, for at least six seconds. If you multiply it out properly, you'll find that it tots up to seven tenths of a minute, and time is precious, in these rushing days of the new century."

"You don't appear to think so," his sister chided him.

"I know so." Dickie faced about and sat down on his chair-back. "I found it out, this very day, when that evil little Tyler boy busted my metronome. He said it was an accident," Dickie continued meditatively; "but I misdoubt me of his veracity, when I remember the diabolical gleam in the corner of his left eye."

"What about the right one?" Dorcas inquired, while she folded her hands behind her and leaned back against them, to keep them out of temptation's way.

"It was a beacon light of sanctity, and glued fast to the pages of *Greenland's Icy Mountains with Variations*," Dickie told her. "But, do you know, until I had this little rat to teach, I never realized at all the pull it gives you to be cross-eyed. It's too fatiguing to keep up with both the eyes at once. In time, from sheer exhaustion, you pin your faith to the more specious one, and let it go at that."

"But —"

Dickie, waving his handful of cotton batting, checked Dorcas at the very beginning of her speech.

"I was just going on a little further," he warned her. "It's quite in character, too; *Dickies* always are supposed to expound. That's what makes them so lovable. Well, as I was saying, what's the matter with your work? That is."

"Whose work?" his sister demanded.

"Dorcas's. You don't do any. You only sit back and look picturesque, and egg me on to further toil," Dickie assured her, with a tranquil disregard of wholly obvious truth.

Dorcas, forgetting herself in the interest of the coming exposition, bent forward and laid her hand on the cover of the kettle.

"What is?" she asked.

"S-s-szt! 'Ware!" Dickie chopped at her with the paper knife. "That is," he repeated, as once more she clasped her hands behind her. "If you wait long enough, the laws

of human nature always supply a symbol from the context."

"A tinkling cymbal, if you mean yourself," his sister interrupted.

"Tinkle, or boom; it does n't matter which, so long as it's to the purpose. Dorcas spends so much time looking to see if her work is really growing that she does n't have any leisure left for work."

Bertha, sitting by the screen which was optimistically supposed to conceal the bed and wash stand, rose and went to join Dorcas beside the table.

"Poor old Dorcas!" she said vaguely.

"Yes, I know!" Dickie clasped his hands, knife and cotton and all. "Poor old Dorcas, with a vengeance! That's what has set me to expounding. Dorcas, 'fess up. How much have you really done, since you came down here?"

"Here?" She raised her brows, in a feigned inquiry which she hoped would delay her confession.

"Yes, down here. To New York. To the world's great market place, if you will," Dickie persisted. "How much work have you actually done?"

"I — I'm not sure, Dickie."

"Yes, you are sure, too," Dickie contradicted. "We all keep track of those things, whatever we may do about our bank accounts. You did the joke. I know. You also did the story about the gun that exploded and knocked the man's head off, and the one about the bell-ringer who was cut to pieces by his biggest bell — really, Dorcas, you have a taste for mutilated heroes; but I suppose that belongs with your extreme youth — and you have done some frilly little essays. What else?"

"A shipwreck story," she suggested rather faintly.

"Did you smash up your hero in that, too?" Dickie queried callously.

The colour rose in Dorcas's cheeks, and Bertha thought it high time to intervene.

"For shame, Dickie! It's mean to tease her," she protested.

"It's for her good, like vaccination," Dickie offered counter protest. "Well, never mind the hero, Dorcas. Let's see the story."

Dorcas turned a shade deeper scarlet.

"It is n't done, Dickie," she confessed.

"Not done? But you began it ages and ages ago. What have you been up to, in the mean time?"

There came an instant's silence. Then Dorcas hurled the truth at him defiantly.

"Mizzling, Dickie," she said.

Dickie's eyes fell, before the honest gaze she bent on him. In all truth, there was reason that Dorcas should be mizzling, as she called it. Day by day was teaching her more surely the dreary lesson that, in the life she had chosen to adopt, in the work which tempted her to give it trial, she was a total, an entire misfit. She had brains, and leisure, and an infinite amount of pluck; but that was her whole set of tools for opening the door of a most difficult profession. Alternately, she sat at home, cudgelling her brains for original ideas, or else for extraordinary phrases in which to dress up the trite ones, and tramped the streets in search of minor editors who would deign to look at her wares. In slow succession, she had offered herself in turn at every office which smelt of printer's ink, as candidate for a downward sequence of position which began at assistant-editor-in-chief and ended at the feminine equivalent of "devil." At one point only had she balked. She would starve, rather than do society reporting. She felt she owed as much as that to the memory of her brace of Mayflower ancestors.

Granted the special training, Dorcas might have made a brilliant success in any one of a dozen different lines. The only fault lay in her lack of fitness for them all. Like many and many another girl, she had made the huge mistake of casting herself out of college and upon the world at large,

without paying any heed to the simple economic law that the demand always depends on the quality of the supply. Within the circle of the narrower horizon of the college world, it had seemed to her that her bachelor's degree, looming large upon that horizon, was the master key to all the doors of the whole house of life. Too late, she was realizing her mistake, realizing it in terms of mind and body, in relaxing courage and in weakening grip even upon the work which she still felt lay before her. Exhausted and undernourished, her body now was failing to hold her nerves taut and steady. They were loosening fast, in these latter days, and kinking as they loosened.

Meanwhile, the boarding-house seemed to her well-nigh intolerable. Privacy was impossible in the upper regions where Dorcas dwelt, for the whole place, lightly built as any summer cottage, hummed to the human lives crowded within as hums the body of the violin. From the realms below, there floated upward the continual aroma of boiling cabbage soup, flavoured with intermittent waves of burning meats, or scorching sugar, or else the reek of heated vinegar which told, accurately as any clock, of the arrival of the hour for the daily cleaning of the kitchen range. From the realms below, too, there floated upward more or less continuously the strivings of the landlady's daughter to express her soul in terms of music. Early in her career, she had had aspirations. At their height, she even had been used to play a thing called *The Spirit Waltz*; and now, years afterward, she still kept up the noxious habit. Her teacher had assured her it was classical; but it resembled nothing else so much as it did the wailing of a neglected banshee, and its rhythm was modified by the fact that the pianist, lacking a proper coach, had never had her fingers trained into the mysteries of what the sporting world terms team-play.

The landlady herself had long since renounced all aspirations. She had developed a Calvinism based upon vast wedges of cold apple pie; and her consequent theory of pre-

destination was of the pessimistic sort. Certain of her clients, indeed, maintained that she had developed her ideal of the house as preparation for her ideal of the hereafter. Dorcas was less outspoken; at heart, though, she shared their views.

Only a week before this had come Christmas; and the festal spirit of the day had only intensified the gloom by force of contrast. Heretofore, Dorcas had adored the sacred holiday, despite its occasional trail of the mercantile spirit and of consequent swappery. Now, for the first time, she doubted the inherent spirituality of Santa Claus. No great moral power in the universe would be capable of reducing her to such depths of woe as those that assailed her, while she struck out one name after another from her tentative list. In the end, but two remained: Pater's, Dickie's. Bertha was another girl, and would understand. She gave to Dickie a vivid little poster of the Cat and Fiddle; but for Pater she unravelled out her new silk mittens and reconstructed the resultant skein into a necktie. Later, she regretted the order of bestowal of her gifts. A necktie meant the price of a dinner to Dickie. Then she stilled her regrets. Dickie would rather laugh than eat, any day; and it would be good old trusty Pater who would appreciate her handiwork.

Three days after Christmas, her doubts increased. Santa Claus might be a great moral power; but was he wholly practical? Not one of her old friends had forgotten her, it seemed. Few of them were in total ignorance of her present surroundings and future prospects. None the less, she had garnered in nine calendars, three paper knives, four blotting-pads tied up with such enormous ribbons that no superposed muscle could induce them to lie flat, and a vast and varied assortment of pale blue haberdashery. blue being the colour she especially loathed.

"But never mind, Buddha!" she said pluckily, while she toiled to make room for them in her bottom bureau drawer. "They're harmless, and we've acknowledged them as loving thoughts. Perhaps we did n't lie too badly. Anyway,

they'll come in handy for another year. And yet," she closed the drawer a little ruefully; "I do wish there had been just one of them that I could by any possibility have used. When you yearn for new elastic for your garters, it's trying to be put off with a rose-coloured blotter garnished with a spray of calico roses and an enormous bow."

Then, obedient to some sudden impulse, she jerked the drawer open once more, jerked out the offending blotter and jerked off the bow. A moment later, the bow rose perkily from the buxom neck of Buddha. It was between tears and laughter that Dorcas replaced the elephant upon his shelf.

"There, old man!" she said, and her accent was a bit hysterical. "At least, whatever comes to me out of the Christmas stocking, you shall have something that you can get the good of. You deserve it, too, for the way you stand by me, and listen to all my mizzles without a word of 'I-told-you-so,' or criticism."

And so Christmas had come and gone, and the new year was at hand, the new year whose advent, heretofore, Dorcas always had watched with eager, hopeful eyes. Now she faced it listlessly, with an apathy too dull even to admit of a foreboding, too dull even to pay any but a languid attention to the harangue of Dickie who still sat upon his chair-back, although a china cup had replaced his wad of cotton batting.

"Well, as we were saying," he observed; "you have achieved one joke, and four nine-page essays, and two stories and a half. And you have been here just six months. Dorcas, that's no decent output, even granted that they were good."

"Dickie!" his sister once more intervened. "They are good; it's only that they —"

Dickie waved his spoon at her, as he made blunt answer, —

"Good things invariably gets took."

"Generally," Dorcas admitted faintly.

"Always," Dickie insisted, with more truth than gallantry.

"Then," for the first time, Dickie heard a desperate ring in the girl's voice; "then what next, Dickie?"

"Do some better ones," Dickie's sister made practical suggestion.

Again Dickie's words were abnormally free from chivalric courtesy.

"No use. You 've proved you can't. If you could, you 'd be about it, without my telling."

"Then what —"

"Don't put all your powder in one blast," Dickie replied oracularly.

Dorcas gave a tired little sigh, and leaned back in her chair.

"Dickie, I may be very stupid," she said slowly; "but I can't seem to get at the good wine underneath your fizz."

"Poor old chap! You 're quite done up." Dickie, looking distinctly anxious, clambered down from his chair-back. "And here I 've been sitting like an ass, lecturing you, when I ought to have been giving you tonics and rich food. Dorcas, you 're ill."

"No; I'm only a little —" She paused for the proper word. Instead of the word, there came a sudden hotness of her eyes. Swiftly she jerked herself upright once more. It would be disgusting, if she cried in Dickie's presence. "It's only that I did n't sleep, last night, and have a consequent headache," she said hurriedly.

Dickie eyed her askance.

"At least, do be original in your lying, Dorcas," he advised her. "I've lived too long with my own sister to pay any especial attention to the plea of headache. You're worried, and you're badly under-fed. I know you girls; you'll skip a soup and eat a chocolate éclair, every last time. Then you wonder why your work goes bad. This house is enough to kill a mule, anyhow. Come and bunk in with Bertha. We may not be elegant; but, at least, we are sanitary."

Dorcas looked up and faced him steadily.

"Dickie," she said, without flinching; "I have n't got the money."

"Where is it?" Dickie blustered, for something in the girl's eyes and voice jarred him out of his customary jovial poise.

"I have spent it."

"All?"

"All but seventeen dollars and sixty-four cents."

Dickie whistled. Then, —

"If that's the case, you'd better give the sixty-four cents to charity, and take the seventeen dollars and buy a ticket for home," he told her.

"I have n't any home —"

"Everybody has," Dickie asserted masterfully.

"But this," Dorcas ended her sentence as if she had been deaf to the assertion.

Dickie stared at her for a long, mute minute.

"Good Lord!" he said then. Then he stuck his fists into his trouser pockets, and walked away to the window. "Dorcas," he said, after an interval of staring down at the flapping clothes-lines in the court; "do you mean it for a fact that you have neither a home to go to, nor any money?"

She bowed her head in assent. Then she lifted her head again and spoke proudly.

"Even if I had," she told him with some spirit; "I would n't give in now. I've hung on too long to make me willing ever to let go, until —"

"Until you pull out one of the tail feathers of the bird of fame," Dickie suggested moodily. "I've heard you girls talk before now. One half of what you say is nerves, and the other half is bosh."

"Dickie!" his sister expostulated, for the third time.

Dickie swung around to face her.

"Well, I can't help it; I'm too mad," he told her, much in the vernacular of his own knickerbocker days. "Here's

Dorcas, all gone to shreds and patches, and we 're not doing a thing to help her out. Nice friends, we are! I say, Dorcas," he swung back again; "won't you come to Bert on a visit, for a little while?"

She shook her head.

"Not until I am better company than I am at present."

"Or let her give you just a little loan? We 'd take Buddha as security, if you insisted." Dickie tried to force the laugh he was so far from feeling.

Dorcas rose, crossed the floor and shut her hand on Dickie's sleeve.

"Dickie, you always were a darling," she said a little breathlessly. "I know, if you and Bertha had a cent, you 'd give two-thirds of it to me, give it gladly. That does n't make me willing to accept it, though. If I ever do win out and come up to the top of things, it must be by my own work, or nothing. There 's only just one thing I 'll take from you."

"And that?" Dickie demanded eagerly.

"Advice."

Dickie's face fell.

"You might as well try to harrow a ten-acre lot with hens' teeth," he said disconsolately. "What 's the good of advice to a chap that 's needing beef and beer and a bank account?"

"Everything. It gives her something to hang on to," Dorcas answered swiftly.

Turning, Dickie rested his eyes upon the eager face, now grown thin about the temples and about the lower jaw, upon the brown eyes, brave still, despite the haunting melancholy of their steady gaze, upon the heavy coils of hair across which ran one single thread of white. Then he spoke.

"You 've been hanging on much too long for your own good, already, Dorcas. It 's time for you to let yourself down a little, and relax." He hesitated for a minute, still studying the face before him. Then he went on once more.

"You want advice? Go to the nearest doctor, and let him look you over."

"I can't afford it," she protested.

"Tonics are cheaper than hospitals," he warned her grimly.

"Perhaps," she assented.

"Then will you go?"

"I'll see. But, about the work?" She smiled back at him bravely. "You have n't yet explained your utterance about the powder," she reminded him.

"Oh, that!" Dickie's accent was disdainful. "I was just spouting for my own amusement. So far as I meant anything at all, I had a notion of advising you to cut out short stories and such trash, and try to do a novel. I've told you the same thing, before."

She twisted her lips into a thoughtful pucker.

"What should I live on, whilst?" she queried.

Dickie's bluntness came back upon him. It was his creed that one, in earnest, should not stop to mince matters.

"The same thing you are living on now," he answered her.

The answer fell into a thoughtful silence. Dorcas broke the silence.

"And, if I fail?"

"You won't be any worse off than you are now," Dickie told her, with a fresh access of bluntness.

"But what better?" she inquired, and Dickie, watching, was surprised to see that she seemed to be laying stress on his opinions.

"Just this: that, having failed along one line, you'll be finding out whether or not it's in you to make good along another," he told her gravely. Then, holding out his hand, he added still more gravely, "Dorcas, it's no sort of fun to smite one's best chum on the raw, as I've been doing. Sometimes, though, it's the kindest thing in the long run. Anyhow —" And their fingers shut together in token of their mutual understanding.

It was a moment later that Dickie spoke again.

"And how about the doctor?" he said persuasively. And Dorcas made answer, with unexpected meekness, — "Well, if I must. It's only fair to give your good advice all the help I can."

"You promise?"

She nodded.

"There's one rooming just below me. He's shockingly profane about *The Spirit Waltz*; but he looks clever. I'll see him, first thing in the morning."

Then Dickie went his way with his sister. Dorcas, left alone, took down Buddha and nursed him in her arms, the while she sat and pondered on the advice she had received from Dickie. When at last she rose, it was with a little smile that she looked down at the gray cloth countenance.

"His hair needs cutting, and he never remembers to trim the edges of his cuffs," she said aloud. "Still, he is sane, and, what's a great deal more to the purpose, Buddha, he's very, very good."

Then she replaced the elephant on his accustomed perch and, turning back her own cuffs, fell to washing out her inkstand.

CHAPTER SIX

THE doctor was one of the derelicts of his profession. He was clever, well-trained, ultra modern. Unhappily, at the beginning of his career, he had made a bad mistake, and now, like too many others of his kind, he had come to bury it in New York's great human quicksand.

Dorcas found him in the unwonted rush of having two office patients awaiting him at once. The first was disposed of swiftly. Then he turned to Dorcas.

"Now you?" he said, with refreshing brevity.

The reply of Dorcas was as brief.

"I am tired out and run down, and I've agreed to write a novel. I want a tonic."

Unfortunately, the doctor took her proved ability as granted, and asked no questions. Instead of giving her advice, he gave her a prescription.

She hesitated irresolutely, after she had paid for it.

"When shall I come back again?" she asked.

The doctor, derelict though he was, had his own standards, such as they were.

"No use in your coming back at all," he told her curtly. "This tonic is the best thing I could give you, if you came a dozen times. Let it get in a little work, and then go about your novel. Repeat it, if you like; but I would n't increase the dose, unless it's absolutely necessary." And, before Dorcas could speak again, he had bowed her out of his dingy little office.

Three or four days later, Pater was celebrating an unexpected sale by having tea in his studio. As a matter of

course, his guests came early. Teas in Pater's studio were of rare occurrence, and so much the better worth the while accordingly. There was always the delight of prowling about the bare, beautiful room with its restful empty spaces and its few fine properties, always the interest of seeing Pater's newest bits of work: the wooden, spiritless portraits over which he smoked and toiled and mulled, and which he loved with the tenderness a mother feels for her mentally deficient child; and the gleaming scraps of springtime woodland, the sunny streaks of cowslip-spotted meadow, glowing with life and cheer, the happy, brilliant bits of pictures for which Pater, splashing them down in odd moments, felt no sort of affection. And yet, these were destined, later on, to find their permanent home in some large gallery, while the wooden portraits seemed designed to end their days in the second-best guestrooms of the namesakes of their maligned originals.

Even apart from the pure artistry of the occasion, Pater's teas would have been popular for the quality of the cakes and ale they offered. As a rule, his guests were wont to feed themselves and each other upon variants of bread-and-butter, and biscuits quite palpably of American manufacture. Pater, on the infrequent occasions of his giving them anything at all, gave them a mighty meal, for his cousins all lived in England, and Pater had spent time enough with them to have imbibed somewhat of their traditions. As result, he rarely received regrets to any invitation; his guests came early and stayed late.

Last of them all, that day, came Dorcas. Out of her little store of last-year finery, she had contrived to put herself in brave array; and, when she came inside the studio, she was walking on her toes.

Dickie saw her first.

"Well, I 'll be jiggered!" he said uncouthly.

Pater, across the room, glanced up. His eyes echoed Dickie's verdict.

"What has happened, Dorcas?" he demanded, while his hand shut over hers.

"I wish I knew, myself," she told him gayly. "Wait, though! That's not a socially decent response to make. Instead, I should cast down my eyes, and say 'What makes you think so?'"

"You saucy minx!" Pater, his fingers still shut over hers, gave their two hands a little shake. "What ails you, anyhow?"

Dorcas pulled her hand away, and fell to work upon the buttons of her coat.

"Nothing ails me; that's the fun of it," she answered. "I never felt so ridiculously young and well and frisky in my life. Pater, I'm ripe for anything, to-day. Would you like me to paint your picture?"

"Thanks; I'd much rather do your own," he retorted, watching her changing, eager face, which had lost all its look of worry and weariness, and regained its old-time beauty to the full, gained, too, a brilliancy which it had never known till then. "Give me a sitting for to-morrow morning, and I'll send you to the next Salon," he urged her, after a moment's silence.

She shook her head in gay derision of his passing earnestness.

"I'd much rather you sent me to the table to make the tea," she said. "I'm starved."

"And the sitting?"

She drew down her face, in a merry pretext of professional solemnity.

"The morning is my best time for work," she assured him, and her voice was pompous.

"I thought work and you were no longer upon speaking terms," he answered.

Her pomposity and her mirth dropped from her, and the red came into her cheeks, betraying to his searching eyes the instability of her nerves.

"I did n't expect that from you, Pater," she said, too low for the others to hear.

He saw the increasing glitter in her eyes, knew that it was wholly alien to the brilliancy he had seen there when she first came in, and promptly dubbed himself a brute.

"I beg your pardon. I was only chaffing you."

Her hand went out to his.

"And I was testy, Pater. I did n't mean to; but I can't quite stand chaff about such things — yet. After the weeks of total brain-vacuum, it is so good to get back into work again."

"And you are working?"

"Madly. My pen can't keep up with the words, as they come tumbling out of my head. Of course, it all may be the merest twaddle; but just now it seems very good to me."

He nodded.

"I know the mood. It comes to us all, a few times, I suppose. Even if it has its ending in disillusion, it's worth while for the sake of what it is as long as it is going on. We'll talk about that by and by, when we get these hungry youngsters fed. Anyhow, it agrees with you; I never saw you look so well. Only don't overdo it, child. The fire is bound to burn just about so long. The more you hurry it, the sooner it's all over; and, once over, the ashes are very cold and gray and unsatisfactory. Now come along and brew the tea."

Tea over, the group broke up a little. While some of them removed the fragments of the feast, and while Pater, by the window, held forth to others upon the merits of an old silk curtain of a particularly messy shade of green, Dickie and Dorcas, like a pair of happy children, prowled up and down the studio, commenting with untrammelled frankness upon the paintings scattered through the place.

"It beats me," Dickie said at last, his nose three inches from the canvas; "how any man can manage to see a curling billow, when he gazes on a ragged blob of white paint not

any wide and three-quarters of an inch thick. It is my growing notion, Dorcas, that we gazers are a long way cleverer than the artists are, themselves. Any chap can chug on a chunk of paint; but it takes a well-trained intellect to decide whether it's a rosy mountain daisy, or a pink-nosed, bleating calf."

"Dickie," plainly Dorcas was deaf to his harangue, as she dropped his arm which she had plucked to gain his full attention, and backed off to a distance that allowed her to face him with some degree of comfort; "I have taken your advice."

"Which?" Dickie queried absently, as he tested the surface of the billow with an inquiring finger-nail.

"Don't ruin the landscape," she besought him hastily.

"Pater would n't care," Dickie made jaunty reply.

"No; but the public would. If you really must make a scientific investigation of Pater's technique, do try it on the shiny arm of that girl over there. It looks exactly like the leg of a mission table, and a scratch would add the final touch of realism."

Dickie shook his head.

"Why can't the fellow see what he can do, and what he can't?" he asked the circumambient air.

Dorcas, though, answered.

"We none of us can, till we are told. Dickie, I really wish you would pay a little bit of attention to me. I'm getting ready to thank you."

"I'm sure you're very welcome," Dickie said politely. "On the whole, what for?"

"The advice you gave me."

"Don't mention it. Which advice was that?"

"The — novel." Dorcas's breath caught on the word.

Dickie forgot the canvas, and straightened up alertly.

"You're at it?"

"Hard!" The feather in her hat shook with the concentrated emphasis on the single word.

"I'm glad, Dorcas." But there was no tameness in the voice of Dickie, as he spoke. "Is it going well?"

"I believe so. Of course, it's only just getting under way, and it's impossible really to tell; but I can't help hoping. The queerest thing of all was the way the plot came to me, in one great, hasty lump of thinking."

Dickie shook his head at her.

"Dorcas," he said gravely; "whatever your plot, your English is deplorable."

Her answering laugh had all its old, blithe ring.

"That's what I use, not what I put away on paper," she told him. "But was n't it strange about the plot? I had n't been thinking about it in the least; and all of a sudden it came. Ten minutes later, it was all there: characters, names, details, everything."

She spoke with a mounting excitement which Dickie found disturbing. Accordingly, he resolved to bring her down to earth with a bump.

"Did you look at your watch to see?" he asked prosaically. "Once on a time, I heard a revivalist assure a crowded audience that he had been converted at twenty minutes after two in the morning. I always wondered how he knew."

"And I remind you of him?" Dorcas's laugh showed that Dickie's flippant interruption had not collided with her egotism in the very least.

"Precisely. Anyhow, though, I'm glad you're at it. I've always felt you would succeed there, if anywhere. Now, once you're started, the main thing is to keep a steady grip, and tighten it a little, as you go along."

"Dickie," Dorcas spoke thoughtfully; "you ought to be doing things, too."

Dickie surveyed her mirthfully.

"The arrogance of creative art! And I thought I did do things. What else is it to be a human pianola?" he demanded. And then, and in a wholly different tone, he asked her, "And what about the tonic?"

"I got it," Dorcas told him, with supreme indifference. "I told you that I would."

"Good child! When?"

"Oh, the other day. The day after I saw you last."

"Is it good?"

Dorcas made a wry face.

"How should I know, till it begins to work? It's sweet, and rather nasty."

"Potent, then. Nasty things always make for our improvement. I smacked the Tyler pupil's ears, this morning."

"Did he break the metronome again?"

"No; he gave a dose of milk punch to his mother's Persian cat, and then laughed at the resultant antics. But about the novel: you really feel you've found your feet?"

"I really do. What's more, I have a deep desire within me to begin to kick," she answered. "What's still more, I think that very soon I shall."

"Gently," he cautioned her. "It's fun to feel it bubbling; but don't let yourself spill it out too fast."

"Dickie, your metaphors always were detestable," she rebuked him. Then she changed her tone and became grave again. "But was n't it strange about the plot?" she asked insistently. "I had supposed it was a thing to delve for and to fret one's self about, for days on end. I had n't begun to let myself think about it all; and, that very night — no, the next night after you were there — the whole plan came flashing across the darkness, just as I was lying still and trying to go to sleep. It was nothing else in the world but one huge, coloured moving picture, slowly rolling out before my eyes."

"Dorcas," from across the room, Pater's voice cut in upon their talk; "come over here and tell me what you think about this latest thing of mine."

And Dorcas, leaving Dickie and the subject of her novel, went.

Later, the groups crystallized anew. This time, Dorcas was left with Pater standing by her side.

"By the way," she said to him suddenly; "I have always meant to ask you more about the red-haired man."

"The red-haired man?" Pater's voice and eyes were vague.

"The one we saw at the concert, the other night," she reminded him a bit impatiently. "The one you spoke about. He looked interesting. Is he? I'm sure you said you knew him."

Pater's face grew very grave.

"I do. He is interesting," he told her briefly.

"In what way?"

For a minute, he looked down at her with eyes that did not see the face before him. Then, —

"Dorcas, if you don't mind, I'd a little rather not discuss him," he said slowly. "The man is an old friend. I know him through and through, know him for good or ill. The ill is sometimes more in evidence than the good; but it's not quite the poor chap's own fault. The good in him is of the best that ever is found floating about in human nature. They're always at war; some day, they are bound to fight it to a finish."

"And then?" Dorcas put the question timorously, for she had never heard Pater speak like that before.

Pater's eyes fell to the floor. His voice grew reverent, as he spoke the trite old phrase, —

"The Lord only knows."

"Speaking of moving pictures," Dickie sauntered up to them just then, his fists in his pockets, and on his face a smile that betrayed his ignorance of the way his phrase was bound to jar upon their common mood; "speaking of moving pictures, Dorcas, there's a fine show on at the Olympie: *Twelfth Night* sandwiched in between an Alpine hunt and a moral tale. I'm rich, five-cents-apiece worth. What's the matter with my standing treat to you and Bert, and our going there, to-night? It will make an artistic finish to this merry little function. You might go with us, Pater. You'd get all sorts of useful points for future work."

Nothing was the matter with the plan, it seemed; and, two hours later, the quartette of them sat in the stuffy darkness of the hall, listening to the clicking of the motors, as the final tale unrolled itself before them, a tale whose insistent moral lashed its audience as with a flail. It began with a baby, dosed with soothing syrup. It ended with the same baby, turned to a prematurely senile adult who met his death in delirium tremens of the most deplorably realistic description. The intermediate stages left little to the imagination. They were numerous, and a little too palpably steady in their downward course; but the audience received them breathlessly, and apparently took home their lesson to its heart. Dickie, however, shook his head, as once more they stood on the sidewalk, breathing in great gulps of the clean night air.

"I feel inebriated, but not cheered," he observed to Dorcas. "All in all, I prefer the moral to be a pin-prick, not a plaster. A thing like this would drive me to drink from very contrariety of spirit, if only to prove that drunkenness possessed its lucid intervals."

And Pater nodded, as he signalled to a passing car.

Inside the car, and seated, Pater was surprised to feel Dorcas's fingers shut upon his arm.

"Yes?" he said absently, as he fumbled in his pockets for the fares.

"Hush!" she bade him, with sharp irrelevance. "There he is!"

Pater extracted four pennies and one ten-cent piece, eyed them askance and closed his fist upon them.

"Who is?" he queried vaguely, as he prepared to dive again.

"Your man. Don't look," she warned him hurriedly.

"How can I see him, then?" Pater's question was flippant, but not unnatural. Then once more he plunged his fist into his pocket.

Dorcas waited patiently until the muffled clash of coin had

ceased, and Pater, breathing a little short, was sitting upright once more. Then, —

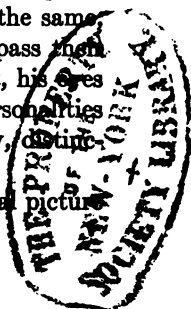
"It's your red-haired man," she said cautiously. "He's staring at us now. I wonder why he looks so very queer."

"Where is he, Dorcas?" The question was as sharp as was the glance that Pater flung about the car.

"Down in the corner by the door," Dorcas answered, although she was well aware that, by the time the words were spoken, the answer would be quite superfluous. Even in her first careless glance, many nights ago, she had been quick to realize that the man before her could never escape notice for long at any one time. His face was too mobile for that, his hair too thick and vivid, his figure too tall and slim and graceful, his whole personality, in fact, far, far too insistent. To-night, seeing him for a second time, she realized the fact anew, realized it the more acutely by reason of some change which had taken place within him, a change for which she, at the first, was totally unable to account.

And yet, was there any change, she asked herself. The face and hair and eyes were just the same; the scrupulously formal dress was the same; the same — well, yes, she might as well admit it to herself, just to herself — the same was the curious charm inherent in the man's whole person and manner, a charm which had come back upon her, each time that she had remembered the evening of the concert, a charm which had stayed by her, with a strange persistence, from the hour of her great vision of her novel down to the moment, that same afternoon, when, with her novel in her mind, she had spoken of the man to Pater and listened to the grave evasion held in Pater's reply. The man was just the same, unmistakably the same, man whom she had seen pass so notable in the crowded restaurant. For one instant, his eyes had rested upon hers; for one instant, their personalities had met and mingled. Then he had gone his way, distinctive, unforgettable.

But, after all, had she forgotten? Had her mental picture



dimmed, or been muddled by the theory of what it was she had wished to see? Had she forgotten a curious looseness of the smiling lips, a slight vagueness of the dark red-brown eyes, a little carelessness of dress, an even greater carelessness of pose? This man's smile was a trifle vacuous; his tie was a wee bit askew, and loosened at the crossing of the knot; he sat cornerwise in his seat, hunchy and with his feet trailing forward half across the aisle.

Only an instant afterward, question had dawned in the brown eyes of Dorcas, question, and with it a vague sense of fear. Once more, her hand shut hard on a fold of Pater's sleeve.

"Pater," she whispered, "what —"

But, without waiting for the finish of her question, without so much as a word of apology to the girl beside him, Pater had already risen and was moving down the aisle. At the door he halted. There was a handclasp, a quick, low conference. Then, without a single backward glance of explanation or apology, Pater made a signal to the conductor, and, arm in arm, the two men left the car.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR the next two weeks, Dorcas laboured unremittingly upon the novel. In the mornings, she found it a bare-boned skeleton; at noon, it appeared to her a gleaming, beauteous soul; at bedtime, it seemed merely a sleek and comfortable little body whose future might hold all things, or else nothing at all, within its grasp. She had moments of suspecting the former alternative, hours of fearing the latter; yet she toiled on, giving herself up absolutely to the frenzy of workfulness that seethed within her. For the time being, she lived inside the novel, tasting to the full the joys and sorrows of the people of her brain. Temporarily, these people had displaced her former friends; they seemed to her more vital, infinitely more interesting.

Dickie, feeling this new attitude of mind and resenting it, had been prompt to utter his resentment.

"That 's where you writers score," he said discontentedly, one day when he had met Dorcas striding along a footpath of the Park, her wide eyes fixed on vacant spaces, her lips smiling. "When we others get to be a bore, you can just hike yourselves out of our way, and go to work to manufacture people that you like a whole lot better."

Dorcas had recalled herself from scenes invisible to Dickie, and had smiled up at him in what she felt sure was the same old way, and therefore Dickie seemed to her a trifle critical of the quality of her greeting. Dickie, on his side, however, had felt equally sure that the smile came from her conscience, not from her enthusiastic interest in his personality.

"Not like them better, Dickie," she answered gently.

"It's only that we find it interesting to see what they'll do next."

"Exactly!" Dickie swung his cap at a squirrel raiding a bluebird's nest. "If you found us quite as interesting, you'd watch us, though, instead."

Dorcas's superabundant energy sought outlet in an epigram.

"It's because we have watched you, that we care for them," she said. And then she watched Dickie askance, to see whether he appreciated it.

Dickie whistled and gave up his effort to penetrate the mist in which Dorcas, during these latter days, was enveloping her frank, girlish self. He disliked it exceedingly; it made her seem self-conscious, artificial. However, he believed it only a temporary phase of things, born of the novel; and he shrugged his shoulders, held his peace and waited for it to pass by. Dickie was of too practical a turn of mind to risk imperilling a lasting friendship for the mere sake of a few intermittent hours of deeper understanding.

Accordingly, he resolved to keep himself out of Dorcas's way as much as he could do, without arousing comment by reason of a break in his customary habits. When he was with her, he furthermore resolved, he would see to it that the talk concerned itself with the weather, and the state of his haberdashery, and the souls of his pupils, with anything, in short, except the progress of the novel. It was Dickie's shrewd opinion that the novel was absorbing far too much of Dorcas's attention. He suspected that she ate with the latest pages outspread around her; that she slept with them underneath her pillow. Dickie took his theories of work more sanely. He believed that, once the day's stint was done, it was the decent thing to lock it up in some safe place, and then go out and revel with one's fellow man. True, Dorcas went out; but it was plain that the comrades of her long, swift walks were not her mere fellow men like Pater and himself, but rather the dream children of her story, the people born within her brain.

Dorcas, asked, would have found it hard to tell the difference between the fleshly comrades and the ones of ink. Being very, very young, in the beginning she had taken her types from life, had seized upon a face, upon even a bare characteristic, had created out of it a type, and from the type had taken an individual. Once that was done and the name was fitted to it, she took the resultant personal equation to her bosom and hugged it, as one hugs an old-time friend. To be sure, the needed variety of her characters and the intensity of her affection for each one of them was bound to occasion some complexity in her point of view. None the less, she managed to attain a fair degree of impartiality among them, and loved them each and all in turn.

Of course, she was bound to have a favourite, bound to have one whose view-point dominated her own in judging the events that went to make her novel move along. It was a man. Her femininity would insist on that; women, as a rule, do not regard their sisters as worthy of too microscopic study. The man had red hair, and a vivid, mobile face where two opposing moral forces warred ceaselessly for mastery. In body, he was tall and slim and strong; in temperament, he was alternately masterful and deprecating. By turns, Dorcas gloried in his power, and, motherlike, womanlike, sought to assuage his moral sufferings; but always she yielded to his charm. Never, by any chance, did she see the inherent humour of the situation: of her curious infatuation for this creature of her brain and pen. Indeed, in these days of feverish toil, her sense of humour appeared to have departed from her.

Her friends, meanwhile, foregathered in her absence, discussed the situation freely. On Dickie's part, the discussion waxed profane. Pater, however, older and seeing deeper, looked grave and shook his head.

"It's merely a temporary phase of things," he told them. "The only thing about it that worries me is the question, when the phase passes, how much of Dorcas will be left."

Dickie lighted another cigarette, a luxury which replaced his customary pipe only in hours of deep importance. When he had flung his match away, —

“You mean?” he asked briefly.

“That this sort of thing must be terribly exhausting, just like any other form of mania.”

Dickie, rendering himself cross-eyed in his intent consideration of the things concealed in his own smoke trails, nodded in thoughtful assent.

“You’ve struck it, Pater. It is mania, and in its acutest form. However —”

Pater, lighting his own cigarette, merely lifted his brows in question; but Dickie’s eyes were not for him, and Pater was forced to employ the spoken word. He employed that of Dickie.

“However?” he queried.

“However, she’ll have the output to the good,” Dickie assured him.

“If it is good. Is it?”

“How in thunder should I know?” Dickie parried.

“I thought you’d seen some of it.”

Dickie answered, with an unwonted effort for accuracy which somehow suggested a desire to lead the conversation down a bypath, away from the main theme.

“No; only with my mental vision, unless you refer to the blank backs of the sacred pages. From the way she handles them, you can see she considers them very, very sacred, too.”

Pater broke off his ash. Then he leaned back, with an impatient little jerk.

“So do we all, Dickie; that is, if we’ve any sort of reverence in us,” he said sharply.

“Reverence!” Dickie echoed. “I call it blithering egotism. Not that I consider Dorcas, in her saner moments, an egotist,” he added hurriedly.

Pater smiled.

“Dickie, you’re neither polite, nor especially reassuring,”

he told his friend. "Still, it may be rather wholesome, once in a while, to see how the lay world regards us. But about this novel? Don't you know anything about it, honour bright?"

"She read me some of it, one day," Dickie confessed uneasily, for he was loyal to Dorcas, whatever he might think about her work.

"How did you like it?"

A malicious gleam came into Dickie's eyes, as he swiftly saw his chance of escape opening out before him. He flung Pater's phrase back at him sharply.

"I'm merely the lay world, you know. I can't be expected to regard it as you artists would."

"Shut up, Dickie!" Pater laughed good-humouredly. Then he added more gravely, "How did it really seem to you?"

And Dickie gave a reminiscent yawn, before he made frank answer, —

"Infernally strenuous."

Pater sighed.

"I was afraid it might be. Dorcas is, herself, when it comes to that; and what of her work I've seen, has gone with all the rest of it."

"This is n't like what she has done before," Dickie protested suddenly. "It's more in earnest. You feel that she's seeing it all, and taking it all almighty hard."

"Tragedy?" Pater queried.

"You bet! And of the most ultramarine."

Pater smoked in silence, for an interval. Then, —

"It's her age, Dickie," he said. "She is years younger, even, than you; she takes herself a lot more seriously, and, after all, that is the supreme test of youth."

Dickie departed along a side track.

"If only she would n't bust up all her heroes!" he said, with an accent of regretful meditation.

"Does she this one?" Pater inquired elliptically.

"She had n't, the last I knew; but you could feel it coming. In fact, you felt you knew in advance just why it was she had n't constructed him of any more durable stuff. Pater," Dickie's fist descended on his knee with a vigour that set his dangling foot to swinging impotently skyward; "if some one of these women novelists won't take to making up some heroes of reinforced concrete, we American men will become a thing of derision to the whole wide reading world."

Pater puffed in silence. Then, —

"Misery is very salable," he made cynical rejoinder.

When he spoke again, he was standing on his feet, drawn to his full height and looking down on Dickie with eyes which had lost their genial humour, lost, too, much of their unflinching kindness.

"Dickie," he said, and his voice was harsh and stern; "I'd give a year out of my working limit to know what was in that tonic."

In his surprise, Dickie dropped his blazing match. When, with a display of needless vigour, he had crushed it underneath his foot, he looked up, and his face had whitened and grown grim.

"You, too?" he asked shortly.

Pater nodded. Then the two men smoked in utter silence, until it came time for them to go their separate ways.

All this was on a Sunday. On the Tuesday, a great thing happened.

Dorcas had spent the morning in a fury of work which had seemed to her curiously good. With rapid, clean-cut strokes, she had brought her hero to the very edge of his first real opportunity to show out the stuff that lay within him. Tired and cramped with writing, her nerves a little shaky, she had caught up her hat and coat, and started for the long, long walk with which she customarily broke the middle of the day. Just as she was leaving the room, she turned to smile at Buddha, seated upon a dusty shelf, and with a dust-covered pink bow rising perkily from behind his dusty ear.

"Buddha darling," she said to him; "I've neglected you of late, and not told you anything at all. Be patient, though, for just a little longer. Then I'll read you all the things I'm busy writing, and we'll talk them over and find out whether they are really good."

But, as she shut the door behind her, down in her inmost heart, she felt no doubts concerning Buddha's verdict.

When she came in, an hour later, a fresh impetus towards work was driving her to the pen. First, however, she flung herself down in a chair to read the letter she had found awaiting her in the hall below. The letter, opened with a hatpin, proved to be short and to the point.

"DEAR MADAME:

"We shall be glad to use your story, *The Double Wreck*, in our magazine, and to pay you for it at our regular rates. As we note that your address is in the city, we are venturing to ask you to call at our office and talk over with us a suggestion concerning later work.

"Yours very sincerely."

"Buddha!" Dorcas's tone was excited, yet a little doubtful. In her absolute concentration upon her novel, the girl had quite forgotten that, obedient to the orderly habits she had inherited from some bygone ancestor or other, she had forced herself to finish her shipwreck story before she had allowed herself to set out upon her longer, more ambitious work. Of her sending it out, dovelike, to seek a landing-place, even now she had no recollection. Yet here in her hand was the proof that she must have done so, proof that the dove had found his resting-place with unexpected promptness.

Two weeks ago, even, a letter such as that would have sent Dorcas dashing down the stairs without delay. Now, however, she looked longingly at her pen and scattered leaves of paper, clinging hard, the while, to the opening words of her next paragraph, as she had framed them in her mind.

"What would you do, in my place, Buddha?" she asked him vaguely. Then, as if in answer to her own question, she glanced down at her watch. One o'clock! And she had heard that publishers were always testy after luncheon. However —

Her hat and coat still on, she flung herself down before the table, wrote out the opening phrase of the paragraph, and then, on the back of the same sheet, added a dozen runic notes to help her to pick up the theme again, once she returned. Then, rising, she sought her least bad pair of gloves.

"Good bye, Buddha!" she said, as she nodded at the dust-coloured effigy upon the dusty shelf. "When I come back again, I may have many things to tell you."

She hurried out of the room, slammed the door behind her and started to lock it. Then there came a look of sudden recollection in her eyes and, leaving the key still in the lock, she opened the door and went back into the room. Crossing to the washstand, she picked up the tonic bottle, now almost empty, carefully decanted the remainder of its contents into a cup and covered the cup with the inverted saucer. Then she wrapped the bottle in a bit of paper, hunted up her purse, and once more started for the door.

"I may as well do it all at once," she remarked to Buddha. "There's only enough to last till breakfast-time, to-morrow, and I may not want to stop for it, in the morning. Good bye again. This time, I trust I sha'n't come back."

It was the work of only half a minute to leave the bottle at the corner drug shop, with orders that it be refilled in time for her return. Then, scorning a car and glorying in the powerful sweep of her own swinging stride, she crossed to the Avenue and turned northward.

A half-hour later, the interview was drawing to an end. The letter in her hand had proved an *Open Sesame!* to the sanctum at whose doorway she had so often knocked in vain. The owner of the sanctum bestowed upon her the kind, but casual, greeting of the ultra-busy man.

"Yes," he said, directly she was seated; "we shall be glad to publish the story, very glad. The first part of it drags a little, Miss —"

"Sloane," Dorcas said faintly, for a sudden fear assailed her that, even now, he was about to withdraw from his offer, and that she would have had her walk and her broken afternoon in vain.

"Miss Sloane. I beg your pardon; I am very forgetful, I fear. As I say, the first part of it drags, is a little forced and artificial; but the ending is brilliant, brilliant." He repeated the word with unction. "In fact, there seems to be a curious gap between the two parts."

"There was," Dorcas assented.

"Exactly," he purred. "And now, if you could only close it in, it would enhance the value of the story immensely. You would try? Ah, thank you. Thank you very much, Miss Sloane. I assure you that it will be for our joint advantage. And now, about your later work —"

Dorcas left the sanctum in a bewilderment of joy. Behind her, the editor shook his head.

"Poor child! A mere bundle of overtaxed nerves," he said. "She won't hold out like this for long. Still, the novel does sound promising, very promising; and, in the meantime, if she gives us this other story —" And, without troubling himself to finish up his sentence, he returned to his work once more.

Dorcas, meanwhile, went swinging home at a wondrous pace, too eager to get back to tell her tale to Buddha even to bethink herself of the bottle waiting for her in the drug shop on the corner. She took the front steps at a bound, thrust home her latch-key, jerked it out again and prepared to take the long flight of stairs in the same headlong fashion, when her progress was arrested by the landlady, sour-faced and stern as it was her wont to be.

"Miss Sloane," she said; "they've telephoned across from Linsley's to ask you to step in there, next time you're passing."

Dorcas stopped short at her own astonishment. Linsley's was the drug shop on the corner.

"Very well," she said curtly. "I'll go now. Thank you for telling me." And she turned back, to open the front door.

The druggist met her blandly, even apologetically. It was plain that he had braced himself to face a scene. When Dorcas unravelled the mazes of his words, she suddenly discovered that he had a book in his hand.

"You mean," she asked him; "that I need a new prescription?"

He made renewed explanations, and brandished forth the book to support them, in case of need. Dorcas pushed aside the book.

"Your word is quite enough," she told him. "But what have the Pure Food Laws to do with this?"

"By this new ruling," the druggist made patient iteration; "you can only get this tonic on a fresh prescription."

"Why not?"

"It contains *Kola Compound*."

"What's that?" Dorcas's tone was careless, and yet a little bit impatient.

The answer almost knocked her over, by the inherent force of its single word.

"Cocaine," he told her briefly.

In an instant, she had steadied.

"Thank you for telling me," she said quite quietly. "I wish I had known it a little sooner. However, it's not of any great consequence."

But, in her heart of hearts, she knew it was of the very, very greatest consequence; that, in that one instant, the dazzling bubble of her dearest hopes had burst, never to be blown again, though she should live to the limit of one hundred endless years.

Alone in her room, she flung herself upon the bed and clasped her hands across her eyes. For long she lay there,

motionless and silent, save for the great, harsh, ugly sobs that shook her now and then. And then, all at once, she sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing and her white face distorted with mingled fear and fury. Snatching the cup and saucer from the shabby washstand, she flung their brown contents out the window; then, hurling them upon the floor, she ground them into dust beneath her heels. With nervous, shaking hands, she delved among the papers on the table until she found the small white square of the prescription. She tore it into fragments and the fragments into shreds. Then, wetting them in the top of her jug, she rolled them into little oval wads of paste and cast them also from the open window.

It took longer to soak the label from the bottle, which inadvertently she had brought home with her; but in time the label was in other little oval wads, the bottle a mass of broken glass beside the ruins of the cup and saucer. Then, when there was neither anything more to be done, nor any further strength with which to do it, she faced about, now very gray and still, lifted the dusty Buddha from his dusty shelf and, sitting down, still in her hat and coat, gathered him in her arms and bowed her head upon his broadcloth brow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE sat there, all night long. Then, when the dawn began to gray the room, she rose from her chair, gently replaced Buddha on his dusty shelf and moved across the room to her abandoned work. Half-way across the room, however, she hesitated, then turned back. A moment later, Buddha on her arm, a cloth in her other hand, she was wiping all the dust away. Something had passed between her and the broadcloth elephant, that night, which would for ever hinder her from neglecting him in times to come.

As morning brightened into fuller sunlight, Dorcas faced the world with heavy, steady eyes. She knew that things had changed for her, knew now that all her facile work had come, not from herself, but from the potent, deadly drug. She also knew that, granted the stiffness of her moral fibre, no such hour of facile work would ever come to her again. As yet, she was strong enough to feel no regrets for the violent steps that she had taken. The risk that she had run was slight — as yet. Nevertheless, it was a risk, a bad one. Temptation lurked only just around the corner, ready to spring out and seize her by the throat, once she relaxed her vigilance. It was not easy for Dorcas Sloane to renounce her dream, which had brightened and grown rosy during those last days. She was acute enough to know that, in all New York, some druggist could be found whose specialty it was to evade such follies as Pure Food Laws; to know also that, for a consideration which, measured in coin, he would fully earn, the doctor would provide her with innumerable duplicate prescriptions. But — She shook her head.

Just how she had gained her knowledge of the malignant dangers of the drug, Dorcas never knew. It had come to her almost subconsciously; it had lain, hidden in some remote convolution of her brain, waiting the time when it could spring out with the greatest effect, to startle her, terrify her into hurried action. If she had waited to consider all the *pros* and *cons*, to weigh present actual advantage against future potential danger, the chances are that Dorcas might have yielded. It was to prevent this yielding that the terror had sprung out, full-grown and bogey-like, and driven her into hasty self-committal. And now, just as of old Dorcas had set herself to win out in the fight for literary fame, with the same reckless disregard of all the intermediate consequences, she was setting herself to fight the incipient taint she had unwittingly allowed to find root-room within her.

She knew all that this taint portended: a swift rush through a scanty sequence of hours of condensed vitality into a sodden existence that would be far worse than any death, worse because it held within it no germ of immortality. She knew that every yielding made the next one just so much the more inevitable, until *so much the more* became the absolute, and personal history ended in that hour. But she also knew, none better, that her novel was dead, killed by the very nature of the manner of its birth.

Some sudden whim sent her to her mirror. It seemed to her she could not fail to show marks of the struggle she had faced, the night before; and it was with a curious sense of disappointment that she turned away. After a bump, one cherishes the ugly patch of black and blue, regrets it when it changes to green and yellow in the first stage of its recovery.

Dorcas, then, turned from the reflected face before her, crossed the room once again and, forgetful of her breakfast, sat down beside the table and picked up the scattered sheets. She handled them gently, lovingly, as one handles the toy dropped by a dear, dead child. Then, when she felt her eyes

grow hot, she left the pages in a tidy little pile, smoothed her disordered hair and went down to breakfast. If she were to finish up her work without her tonic — she smiled a little over the specious word — she must do everything she could, by way of keeping up her general health.

Breakfast was loathly to her; but pluckily enough she swallowed it, down to the final crumb. Then, after one lingering look out at the sunny morning which seemed beckoning to her to come out into its wintry glow and forget things, she went up the stairs again, went into her room, and seated herself before the little table. It was now or never, she told herself. The supreme test was bound to come; best have it over as soon as might be.

But the test was slow in coming. For two weeks and more, Dorcas had been taking heavy doses of the potent drug, too heavy to allow its effect to be destroyed by one morning of omission. Its spell was still upon her; and, for two hours, she wrote on steadily. The words came a little bit more slowly, perhaps; but they had lost no whit of their customary brilliancy. At the end of two hours, however, she found herself, after her old fashion, busy in outlining a polyangular pig. Hastily she arose, pushing her work aside. After all, there was no especial wonder that her pen should grow a little weary, after the night she had been spending, sitting there alone, with Buddha in her arms. Whatever one's allowance of inherent genius, one's nervous strength was finite. Instead of crowding it beyond its limit, she would leave her work just where it was, and go for a long, inspiring walk.

In the course of her walk, she fell in with Dickie, and Dickie promptly began to chide her.

"What are you doing, tramping the streets in working hours?" he demanded, as he dropped into step. "Are you on strike?"

She laughed.

"No; but my characters are," she told him.

An unfamiliar note in her laughter challenged his attention. He bent upon her a keen, though furtive, glance. His accent, though, was wholly casual, as he said, —

“So much the better. Striking, however hard to manage, at least presupposes some vitality.”

She smiled down at her muff, grown rather bald about the edges.

“That’s nice of you, Dickie,” she told him.

Dickie’s glance was even keener, the second time. Dorcas usually hurled the conversational ball back at him, instead of fondling it like this. Her new mood made him anxious. After an interval of pondering, he decided it was time to put a leading question.

“Do you ever get to where your people, the ones you manufacture, bore you?” he queried, as one in search of casual information.

“Sometimes. Not often.”

And then Dickie, discouraged, decided to drop the subject.

Accordingly, launching himself afield, he discoursed upon the ills of morphinism, as exemplified in the person of the singer whom he had accompanied, the night before. Moreover, he ended his long and prolix discourse with a frank expression of his own opinion.

“It beats me,” he said temperately; “how anybody can be so damned asinine — No, I don’t usually swear in the society of women; it’s not good form, I know — so double-damned asinine as to play with the stuff, in the first place. It’s sure death in the long run, a death from which there’s no appeal. This your corner? I thought you were going on up town. Well, good bye; and be sure to let me know, next time your people go on strike.”

And Dorcas nodded, as she went her way. For the moment, she had imperative need to be alone. She wished to weigh within herself the truthfulness of Dickie’s youthful, cocksure ultimatum regarding the sure death whence there was no appeal. Was it a fact? Was she, too, doomed, as

well as her work? She shut her teeth, and lifted her head in proud denial. Not if she had any strength of womanhood within her. Rather would they both go onward, hand in hand, she and her work, proving to all men, even to the doubting Dickie, that, having faltered, it yet was in them to make good.

Nevertheless, she did not let Dickie know, next time her characters went on strike, an event which happened early, the next morning. His cocksure point of view depressed her; she felt the need of something a little less unyielding than his strict code of right and wrong, something to argue with, stiffening her own contentions while she argued. For, after all, was not she too a little bit cocksure? It had been quite easy to break off the tonic. Would she not be fully justified, then, considering all that depended on her keeping up her mental tone, in postponing that easy breakage until her novel was a thing accomplished? She believed that she would not be justified in any such paltering with ruin. Nevertheless, she would have believed it any amount more firmly, if only she could have had the strengthening exercise of combating the opinions of some one whose belief lay on the opposing side.

However, she held to her own belief, held to it while the days dragged by and her work went bad increasingly. She tried her best to keep it up to the old mark. She lived like an athlete in training for a race. She took in strength from every possible source; she gave it out in one direction only. None the less, the trouble was there, and growing fast. Her characters balked; then turned to things past balking, not even things of stone, but of soggy paste and sugar. Her descriptions were mere verbal iteration; her action dragged and faltered. Then came a day when she realized that her invention had failed her utterly. All morning long, she sat and gazed down at her paper, too vacant of mind even to add her customary frieze of pigs. At noon, she rose, her cheeks hot with renewed decision. She would spend the

afternoon, the whole, long, sunny afternoon, out-doors. Next day, she would shut her novel away out of sight, and begin work upon the story she had promised to the enthusiastic editor.

Early afternoon found her walking swiftly up the Avenue. It was one of the clear, bright days of dying winter, days when the early-morning snow, as yet unsullied, seems to enhance the promise of the spring seen in the blue above; days when the city sparkles, when the tall buildings, gray and dark red, chocolate-brown and faint dusky yellow, catch the sunlight and hurl it to and fro between them in vivid bands of changing hues mingled from all the purer tones that gave them birth; days when the blue river dances in the sun, and the long bridges, arching high above it, seem dainty as a dew-encrusted web against the lustrous azure of the sky.

Despite the promise of the spring, the air was crispy cold, and Dorcas, walking swiftly northward, felt her pulses quicken at its impact. For the hour, it was good, very good and very restful, to forget one's worries and one's questionings, even one's limitations, and just go swinging forward with the long, free stride of perfect physical health, to feel the breeze in one's hair, the sun on one's cheeks, to know that, even if one's work did go awry, the world outside was still beautiful, still a little tonic. Besides, any safe tonic, in these latter days —

"Miss Sloane!"

She glanced up at the greeting. Leonard Coit was standing in her pathway. His hat was in his hand, and the vivid sun smote sharply across his eager face, across his snow-white hair.

For an instant, it appeared to Dorcas that something, some physical thing, came surging up within her until it stopped her breath. She tried to speak, to give him a gay, frank greeting; but her throat refused to answer her volition. Instead of the blithe greeting, it merely sent out a squeezed little cry, —

"You!"

He took her hand in his, and, as he did so, he noted with quick compassion the shabby, mended fingers of her glove, the bald yellow skin at the ends of the erstwhile fluffy muff.

"Child," he said, and his slow, steady accent brought to her a curious sense of masterful protection; "Dorcas child, it is very good to see you."

"And you," she answered him faintly. And then, because the sudden lighting of his face told her it would be unsafe to let him know how good it really, truly was, how much she truly longed to cast herself on his protection, she forced herself to a swift rallying. "You are the most unexpected vision," she told him lightly. "One might almost imagine you as dropping down out of another world."

He saw no need of reminding her that the gay, brilliant Avenue where they had met, was the great thoroughfare of his own world. It would only be tantamount to telling her that she herself was in reality the alien. Instead, his hand still shut around her fingers, he studied her intently. Now that her brilliant colour was fading, he saw the worn lines in her face, lines which matched the mended gloves, the bald yellow patches on the furry muff, the indescribable shabbiness of the old cheviot gown. Moreover, something in her accent had belied the trivial nature of her words. The little, smothered *You!* had been far more indicative of her real thought.

And yet, in all her shabbiness, he saw that the girl still was curiously dainty. Her figure had much of its old alertness, her head the old proud poise. Life had ground her sharply; but Leonard Coit, watching her intently, felt assured that, though the dust of conflict lay upon her, it would brush away, leaving no smirch behind. For so much, he was thankful. In the long months of silence, he had known his longer hours of fear. Now he cast his fears far from him. The city had been harsh, but not altogether pitiless, in the way it had dealt with Dorcas Sloane.

Meanwhile, she met his eyes smilingly and in brave defiance. Reading the question there, she thought it merely had to do with the general shabbiness of her appearance. Had she gained the slightest inkling of what was passing in his mind, her smile would have vanished speedily, to give place to a scarlet stain of shame and anger. To Dorcas Sloane, such questionings, as concerned herself, were inconceivable; inconceivable was the swift prayer of thankfulness which was rising from the heart of Leonard Coit.

Smiling still, she drew her fingers from his hand, and straightened her hat which had slipped slightly to one side in the excitement of their meeting. Then, her hands well within her muff, she nodded up the Avenue.

"Shall we walk on together; or have n't you the time?" she queried nonchalantly. "Really, we are blocking traffic here, and may get ourselves arrested at any moment."

For his sole answer, he signalled to a passing cab. Dorcas smiled again, as she watched the gesture. It was so like him, this masterful abruptness. Moreover, it was very good, just for the hour, to be so dominated.

"Where are you going?" he asked her crisply.

"Up here, a block or two. I was going of an errand," she told him vaguely, for she was quick to realize that it might be well for her to leave a way of escape open before her at almost any minute. The look in his eyes told her this no less surely than did the bumping of her own heart.

"Are you in a hurry, then?"

This time, the eyes dominated her completely.

"N-no," she faltered, for she longed to lie to him, yet could not.

"Then," he turned to the cab; "we'll drive to the Park, and have our walk and talk out up there. Later, the cab can set you down wherever you like."

In the cab, they both were unaccountably silent. Coit's grave eyes were resting upon Dorcas, taking, she felt uneasily, her mental and physical and moral measure, tallying it up

against similar measures he had taken of her, months before. In the silence, the scrutiny became oppressive. Dorcas grew restless, nervous, smoothed her gloves, ruffled the fur of her muff, then fell to fussing with her veil. In the end, the veil came loose, resisted all her efforts to tighten it, and was finally plucked off. To Dorcas's annoyance, her fingers fumbled, as she sought to fold it up. Without a word, Coit bent forward, took it from her, and folded it very deftly. Then, as he gave it back to her, he spoke.

"Dorcas," he said gently; "the time has been very long to me, harsh to us both, I fear."

His voice, its old, remembered cadence, brought the tears to her eyes. To hide them, she turned sharply, as if to watch the buildings at her other side. When she answered, though, her voice was steady.

"Perhaps the worst is over now," she told him bravely.

Then she drew back, afraid, before the exultant note in his reply.

"Please God, it shall be!" he said, and, in spite of the exultance, the tone was grave.

Afterwards, until they reached the Park, the silence was unbroken.

"But, Dorcas child," he said to her, a long hour later; "now I have found you, I cannot let you go again."

"You must," she told him, and her voice showed she was in no mood of careless coquetry.

"But why? Once, months ago, you told me that I had it in my power to make you love me."

"Yes. I did." The answer was in two separate sentences.

"Have I changed since then?"

"Never!" The fervour of her reply surprised them both.

"Or you?"

Sadly she shook her head.

"Perhaps, if I only had, it might be different."

"Then why not —"

Sharply she interrupted.

"That's the very reason, the same old, old reason. Now, more than ever, I'm bound I won't give up — conquered."

It might have been the old, old reason; but Coit, hearing, realized that the despairing cadence on the final word was wholly new.

"Dorcas," he asked her, with slow, insistent gravity; "why fight against it any longer? It's inevitable, the one end for this thing."

Her chin rose, and her colour came.

"Forgive me," she said to him frigidly; "if I insist upon it that I must be the judge of that."

"But, Dorcas —"

With her old gesture, she put up her hand in plea for silence. When the silence came, —

"What you ask of me, what you offer me, has always been impossible," she said. "Now it is even more impossible than ever."

As once before, he recognized the note of finality in her clear young voice. He recognized it, and bowed to its decree. However, —

"Dorcas, at least you will let me come to see you now and then?" he urged quietly, at length. "At least, our old acquaintance gives me the right to ask so much as that."

She bowed her head, while she reflected swiftly. Then, lifting her head, she faced him with her old bright, brave smile, and gave to him a wrong address.

"Pater," Dorcas asked suddenly, that same night, when a temporary silence had fallen on the studio; "what was the matter with your red-haired man, the other night?"

Pater hesitated. Then, like the gentleman he was, he lied.

"He was ill, Dorcas. Sometimes his heart goes bad. The time will come, some day —"

Then Pater let the silence lengthen over his unspoken words.

CHAPTER NINE

FOUR months later, as Dorcas Sloane wearily, drearily went out from the editorial sanctum, it would have been hard to say whether she or the editor himself felt that the talk just ended had taken it out of him the more badly. To Dorcas, it had been the final, impassable ending of all her hopes and plans and dreams, the lifting of a sudden barrier which cut off from the new existence opening out before her, her old life, familiar and endeared to her, it seemed now, by its very difficulties. What would be the nature of that new existence, equally lacking, as it was, in purposes and resources, she could not yet imagine. She had a dull belief that she would get through it, in some way or other. People always did. Beyond that belief, her optimism refused to go.

And the editor, looking on, seeing the anxious face before him whiten and then grow stiff in every line, rather than betray the tragedy which lay behind, felt that he was watching the last agonies of a girlhood which he had helped to murder. In all his long experience, Dorcas was to him a new type of the would-be author; never in all his life had he found it so hard to speak the final, blighting word. Too late, he regretted it that he had not spoken it in ink. However, Dorcas had been accustomed to come in person on her errands to him. Moreover, there were things it was far less kindly to set down in ink. Meanwhile, he tried to cheer himself by reflecting upon his duty to the array of stockholders who lurked behind him. In sheer justice to them, he could not burden his pages with this novel which, beginning bravely, even cleverly, faltered midway in its ninth chapter, and

then went stalking haltingly onward to a lame and awkward close. Dorcas had spread the gauzy pinions of her would-be genius, only to watch them changing to a pair of wooden legs.

The interview had been a hard one for them both. The editor had begun it bravely; he had prayed for wisdom and for gentle tact, the while he saw the tightening lines around the mouth of Dorcas, the feverish glitter coming in her eyes. The girl had grown thin in those past weeks. Moreover, the on-coming of the belated summer, driving her out of coat and furs, showed with a merciless distinctness how thread-bare was the gown beneath, how shabby the mended gloves, how cracked the well-polished shoes. Only the hat, freshly resurrected from the trunk where it had been shielded from the wear and tear of winter, betrayed a hint of Dorcas's former jauntiness; and that, by very force of contrast, added the final touch of pathos to her costume.

"Sit down, Miss Sloane," the editor said kindly, as he pushed an arm chair towards her.

Then, when she was seated, he resumed his own chair, and fell to making a silent inspection of his finger nails, frowning, the while, in thoughtful disapproval.

One's instinct never fails to send out warning signals of a coming storm. Once across the office threshold, Dorcas had been perfectly well aware that his verdict of her novel was not good. She had been using the short interval to brace herself to accept it bravely. Now she looked up to face him with a smile that creased her cheeks, but stopped short before it reached her eyes.

"It was about the novel that you wished to see me?" she asked directly.

"Yes."

"You have read it, then?"

Woman-like in a crisis, she was taking the initiative. Whatever she might extract from him by way of judgment, at least, it would be a relief to have it out and over.

"Yes."

The monosyllable exasperated her by its repetition. She raised her arching brows, and her voice took on a faint edge of sarcasm.

"Really? I had not expected so prompt a decision. What did you think of it?"

Now that she had come to close quarters and grasped the bull by the horns, her feminine lack of logic caused her to feel a dull surprise when the bull arose in self-defence and straightway gored her.

"I am sorry to say, Miss Sloane, that I was exceedingly disappointed in it."

Dorcas paled suddenly, suddenly lost her grasp upon the situation.

"I — I'm sorry," she faltered. "I hope you did n't find it too — very bad."

Slowly he fitted the finger-tips of his left hand to the finger-tips of his right. Then he reversed the operation.

"I — er — am afraid I did," he confessed reluctantly at length.

"And you want me to write it over?" There came a tired drop in Dorcas's voice. Writing it over meant a delay of many, many weeks, and the small loan she had finally accepted from Pater was going fast; in fact, it was almost gone.

The editor drew in his breath. Then he delivered his final blow; but he dropped his eyes to the rug, while he dealt it.

"Miss Sloane, I fear it would be of no use," he told her baldly.

As if under the flick of a physical lash, Dorcas straightened in her chair and faced him.

"You mean it is so bad as all that!" she said, and there was more of horrified surprise than question in her voice.

"I do."

"Then — Then what can you do with it?" she queried blankly.

The editor saw no need to multiply his words.

"Nothing," he said.

There came a short silence. Then, —

"Really, I am very sorry," Dorcas said.

"So am I, Miss Sloane. I had counted on it quite hopefully. Your first story showed great promise in its later parts; and, even though the second one did not come up entirely to my expectations — in fact, it fell quite short of them — I counted surely on this novel to cement the foundations of your reputation." Even in his pity for the girl before him, the editor could not but feel a certain pride in the rhetorical qualities of his own finale.

Dorcas disregarded the rhetoric in the fact.

"But you took the story," she reminded him.

"Exactly. In a sense, I was bound to do so. Besides, I felt sure that undue criticism would only cramp you in the novel at which I knew you were working," he said suavely. "Until that was completed, I wished to leave you a free hand. However," he added, rather as an afterthought; "you may have noticed that we have not published your story."

"I have n't noticed anything about it," Dorcas told him bluntly. "I never read your magazine."

He smiled at his clasped thumbs.

"Perhaps, if you had done so —" he began. Then he checked himself. Why argue with this child, so bravely struggling to conceal the smart of the wound he had given to her pride? He checked his speech, waited for a moment, then, bending forward, took a packet from his desk.

"Then, Miss Sloane, sorry as I am —" His gesture finished out the sentence.

Dorcas stared at him with uncomprehending eyes, then stared at the parcel which he was holding out to her. Strangely enough, the real meaning of the interview had not dawned on her as yet. She had thought of him as merely

criticising her work, without a suspicion of what his criticism must inevitably mean.

"What is that?" she asked him blankly.

"Your manuscript, Miss Sloane."

Without lifting her hand to receive it, she once more stared from him to it, and back again.

"I thought you told me I need not rewrite it," she said slowly.

This time, the editor frowned. He had not looked for density from Dorcas, a density which was forcing him to italicize his meaning. Later on, in thinking back to the matter, it slowly dawned upon him that the girl was not so much dense as dazed. Now, though, he was conscious of a certain impatience.

"I told you I thought it would be of no use for you to rewrite it," he answered, and his voice was curt.

"Then what —"

In the face of Dorcas's non-comprehension, his irritation increased, and with it his curtness.

"Miss Sloane, it is impossible for me to use this thing," he told her shortly.

Dorcas had whitened before. Now she grew livid. In a flash, she saw all that his rejection portended, saw her life stretching away ahead of her, bleak and empty, money gone, work gone, hope gone. In face of that awful, aching desolation, the girl did not stop to count the few loyal friends who were bound, by their very loyalty, to invade it. Rather, she saw it as a total desert, arid and uninhabited and endless. Small wonder that she shrank before it, until, her pride departed, she sought to argue for even a brief reprieve from the horror which, she felt assured, must in the end inevitably come.

"But you promised," she urged feebly.

"If it were good."

She listened to the measured words, as the prisoner listens to the black-capped judge. Then, —

"And you will not publish it, after all?" she asked, in one final appeal for mercy.

He shook his head, rather than trust his voice. He was a kindly man of the middle years; his present eminence had been won through a long apprenticeship of grinding disappointments. In the place of Dorcas Sloane, he was well aware, he would not have made one half so plucky a fight as she had done. His pity and his comprehension drove him to take refuge in a platitude.

"It is not only myself whom I have to consider," he told her. "My duty is to my public."

Dorcas lifted her head, and the colour flowed back into her cheeks, staining them to a vivid scarlet. All in an instant, her sense of humour had returned upon her.

"I am sorry," she said crisply. "I had no idea it was so bad as all that." Then, rising, she took the parcel from the desk, nodded as nonchalantly as she was able, and walked out of the office.

On her way home, she had two unexpected meetings. The first was with the red-haired man, who stood beside her on a crowded crossing. For an instant, Dorcas stared at him with a little throb of pleased surprise. It was as if one of the characters of her novel, one of the children of her brain, had stepped out of the pages to reassure her of the fact of his own vitality and power. Then, as she met his eyes fixed on her with a look, half of recognition, half of the baffled curiosity one frequently bestows upon a seemingly familiar face, she drew her own eyes hastily away. In the short minute that their eyes had met, however, she had felt conscious of some subtle interchange of thought, some comprehension of a mutual understanding, however trivial in its nature. She even wondered if he had gained intuitive perception of the long hours that she had spent in delving into the soul processes of just such a man as he. Her grip tightened around the parcel in her arm, and the colour rose hotly in her cheeks. She hoped not, hoped it most earnestly,

now that her delving had gone all astray. Then, as the crossing cleared and he went striding away before her, she lifted her eyes once more. Was it the imagining born of her futile work, her frustrate hopes; or did the man look gaunt and wan, as if, despite his material prosperity, his own life, too, had gone somewhat awry?

Her second meeting was with Pater. She saw him coming towards her from a side street, saw that their paths must inevitably come together. None the less, she quickened her pace. Her nervous strength was going from her; she longed acutely to get inside her room, to bar the door against all comers, and have it out alone, this inevitable hour of reaction from the strain of these last futile, frenzied months. For, indeed, there had been a sort of frenzy in the fashion in which Dorcas had flung herself upon her work, day after day resolving anew to make up for ebbing interest by increasing toil. Even in the time of it, she had known that she was borrowing recklessly from future strength; now she was well aware that, in her present hour of weakness, she would be called upon to pay back the loan, to pay it to the full. Wearily, even as she quickened her step in the effort to keep out of Pater's way, she asked herself, once the debt was paid, what would be left. She only shook her head. The least surplus there could be, above the nothing.

But Pater was not minded to be passed by, in any such summary fashion as this. Three powerful strides brought him to the corner; three more placed him at Dorcas's side.

"What's the hurry, Dorcas?" he demanded cheerily.

"Nothing. I only —" She faltered.

Still striding along beside her, he held out his hand to take the parcel; but Dorcas tightened her grip upon it and shook her head. Pater yielded to her evident desire and withdrew his hand, watching, meanwhile, her half-averted face.

"Dorcas," he said then; "something is very bad."

She nodded. For the instant, some accent in the kind,

grave voice, full of a gentle comprehension of her crisis, had removed her power of speech. Pater did not hurry her.

"Yes," she said quite steadily at last. "Something is bad, Pater, very, very bad."

"Is it something where I can help?" he questioned.

"No one can help. My novel is rejected."

"Rejected!" His voice showed his astonishment; not as concerned the novel, however, but as concerned this apparent breaking of the editorial faith. "But he ordered it."

"If it were good," Dorcas quoted bitterly. Then she laughed still more bitterly. "His duty to his readers, don't you know," she added.

To her intense relief, Pater asked no further question. Instead, —

"Poor little Dorcas!" he said slowly, and his voice, father-kind, wrapped itself softly across her stretched and throbbing nerves.

She drew a long breath.

"It's come to about the end of things, Pater," she told him.

Swiftly he checked her.

"There is n't any end, Dorcas," he said a little sternly. "It's just the turning of the page, to open a new chapter."

Then, without seeking to drive his meaning home, he tramped on at her side, in a silence so restful and so comprehending that it seemed to the girl beside him as if courage and strength were flowing fast from his big nature into hers. Perchance Pater felt it, too; felt it, and left it to do its work alone. In any case, he did not speak again till many blocks were passed and left behind them. Just once he steadied her over a dangerous crossing, and the shut of his firm, quiet hand on her arm seemed to her to be a new avenue for the inflowing tides of his great strength. For the passing moment, she rested on it, passive as a little, tired child.

It was not until they halted at the steps of the boarding-house that Pater spoke.

"What are you going to do next, Dorcas?"

"I'm not sure. I have n't had time to think. You see, it was all a little unexpected." She forced herself to laugh; but the laugh was far more forlorn than many tears.

He brushed her final words aside.

"Now, I mean?" he asked insistently.

Her laugh vanished, and she eyed him with dull, listless apathy.

"I don't know. Go inside, and shut the door, and think things over," she told him slowly.

"Don't!" The single word was masterful in its crisp abruptness.

"Why not?" His abruptness startled her into something akin to her more normal tone.

"It is n't wise. Besides, what's the use?"

"None. But what shall I do, then?"

"Go to work like a nigger," he bade her shortly.

She dropped her arms, parcel and all.

"I — Pater, I'm too tired," she said brokenly. "Besides, I thought I'd just been proving that it's not much use for me to try to work."

"It depends upon the kind of work." Now, Dorcas, listen." Standing on the pavement beside her, he looked down upon her with kindly eyes which seemed, to the exhausted girl, to be looking her through and through, to be weighing her, sorrow and discouragement, futility and weariness and all, in the light of some standards which her own eyes were powerless to discern, weighing her and judging her very, very kindly. "Dorcas, listen," he repeated. "You're in trouble. Your world is tumbling down. Don't sit and watch it tumble; you'll go mad. Just grit your teeth, pick up whatever pieces are n't too badly broken and go to work with those to build yourself another world, one that is likely to be a little bit more durable. And, meanwhile —"

"Well?" she asked him listlessly.

His answer astounded her.

"Your room was in a shocking mess, last time I saw it," he assured her curtly. "Go in and sweep it, and then give it a good dusting. If I can get hold of Dickie and his sister, I'm going to bring them over to have a picnic supper with you. We'll be in at seven." And, turning on his heel, he walked off and left her standing there alone.

Yielding a curiously implicit obedience to Pater's mandate, Dorcas did indeed let herself into the house, mount the stairs to her room, take off her hat and gloves and look about her for the broom and dustpan. Her present reaction was too great to allow her to seek for Pater's reasons. She was too brain-weary to take in the thought that, in her present mood, meditation might well lead to temporary madness. She merely obeyed the spoken word, because, in days less strenuous, she never had known Pater's advice to go bad.

Bravely she set about the task he had imposed upon her, although the tears, which she could not quite hold back, made sticky rivulets across her cheeks above the cloud of dust driven upward by the broom. Pater had told the unlovely truth. The room was in a shocking mess; and, for a little time, she could stave off thought by dint of physical exertion. At last, however, her tired muscles gave way utterly. She dropped the broom and, turning, looked up at Buddha's gray and cheery little countenance, smiling down at her across the dun-gray cloud of dust.

"Buddha," she said, and her voice was hoarse and feeble; "Buddha dear, what is the use? There's no especial sense in trying to postpone the thinking about what next, because we're perfectly well aware there is n't any next. My money's gone, and I'm in debt; my work has all gone to the bad. I have n't any friends but —" She hesitated, then she added Pater's name, and placed it before the pronoun she had meant to use alone. "Come, Buddha!" She put up her arms and lifted down the elephant. "Come and sit down with me, and think things over. It's bound to come, in time."

However, once she was seated with Buddha on her knee, she found she was too tired to think, to plan, to do anything, in fact, but to accept the present bad times with what stoic grace she could. For long, she sat there silent, her head resting against the ribby chair-back, her eyes half closed. At last, however, she lifted her head and spoke once more.

"Yours is rather a cruel sort of creed, Buddha, after all. 'Existence is suffering; but the cause of pain is desire.' It's true, though; and the worst of it is, we shall go on desiring things to the very bitter end of all remotest time."

Again her lids drooped, and she fell silent. After another interval, again she spoke.

"Buddha, we've got to plan some way to get out of it all," she said slowly. "One has got to go on living, even if it is n't very promising ahead. To stop it, would be a direct confession that one was downed, and even if, inside myself, I know I'm funking, I'll never, never let a soul suspect the fact. Brace up, Buddha! We'll go hunt up a wall that we can turn our backs to, and then, if need be — we'll die — fighting."

In truth, the girl was very weary, and the room about her seemed to be spinning round and round and round. Unconsciously she gripped fast hold of Buddha, and waited dully to find out what would happen next.

It happened soon, a man's step coming up the stairs, a step too swift for Pater, too sturdy in its determination to belong to Dickie. There came a short, sharp knock upon the door. Then, without perceptible delay, the door swung open, and Leonard Coit stood on the threshold.

"Dorcas!" he cried. And then, "Dorcas, you see I have found you, have come for you at last!"

And Dorcas, like a tired, unhappy little girl, suffered herself and Buddha to be gathered into his strong arms, suffered her heavy head to be clasped tight, tight against his shoulder.

CHAPTER TEN

SEPTEMBER gold lay over all the landscape. It brightened the tones of earth and sky; it threw its lustre upon the woodlands, spotted and streaked already with the occasional splashes of wine and scarlet and of vivid amber which announce the coming of the frosts. It intensified the violet tones of the old red sandstone face of the hill across the little valley, and it added an increasing glitter to the waves that danced up and down on the blue surface of the lake, a little farther to the north. Moreover, its more distant duties done, it came to rest caressingly upon the wide verandah where the Coits sat drinking tea.

Before them, terrace on terrace, a formal garden swept half-way to the street, a garden where the early roses had given place to phlox and marigolds and such like gaudy blossoms as best withstand the terrors of the early frosts. Beyond the garden, the lawn rolled down, a smooth expanse of dark green velvet whose making had not been the work of yesterday, nor even of the day before. Behind them, the fine old house bore out the same impression of maturity. Beside the flamboyant modernness of all its neighbours, the great, rambling stone building, all windows and verandahs and unexpected sunny corners, seemed fraught with an added dignity from its ostensible comfort, and from its mellow age. Poised firmly upon its low hilltop, commanding a wide view of northern lake and hill, and of the smoky city farther to the southern end of the great arc of landscape, the place would have been ideal for a honeymoon; but Dorcas and her husband had arrived there, only the night before.

It was a curiously changed Dorcas who sat there in her willow chair, and poured out the tea. To look at her now, no one would ever have imagined, as she handled the massy silver and the Cauldon cups, that, less than six months before, she had known the experience of serving tea in a collection of gaudy horrors picked up at the nearest five-cent counter, of even sitting on the edge of her bed, the while she poured it. Poverty may make strange bed-fellows; but stranger still are its ways of serving tea.

It was not alone that Dorcas Coit, sitting there at ease, with a capped maid hovering about her elbow, was more richly gowned, much better groomed than she had been of yore; not alone that her face, save in certain lights which already she was learning to avoid, had lost the lines traced in it by her year of sharp experience. Both maid and modiste had worked wonders in their separate ways; but the change was deeper a good deal than that. To a remarkable degree, Dorcas impressed one as being mistress of the situation, mistress of herself, of the house to which she had so lately come, mistress of the white-capped maid, mistress of everything, in fact, save of the man who sat across from her, sipping his tea, while he gazed at her with contented eyes. The eyes were gentle now; yet Dorcas had already learned that, on occasion, their brown depths could glow with a spark of masterful indignation. Moreover, the knowledge, tardily gained, that she had to do with a man, and not a thing of softly wooing sighs, had done an infinite amount towards stiffening the girl's own moral fibre.

During their intermittent courtship, Leonard Coit had showed himself gentle, pleading, almost deprecating. Beside him, in her allegiance to her own scheme of life, Dorcas had seemed unyielding, even a little dominant. Once they had been pronounced man and wife, however, all this had changed, suddenly, yet by imperceptible stages and without a spoken word. It was merely that Coit was of cast iron beneath his velvet surface, and that the closeness of their

wedded contact was allowing Dorcas to discover what it was that lay within. Coit fancied that he had married a mere child. Dorcas, however, fancied that she knew better. The year of agonizing work and disappointment had given her a woman's grip on life, a woman's outlook on its possibilities, it seemed to her. Her youth remained in her impulses, her hasty recklessness in grasping issues. Grasped, though, and given a little time for meditation, the issues were worked out by a full-grown woman. It seemed strange to her that Coit had not yet discovered this. His perceptions, extraordinarily keen in other ways, were doubtless dulled by his exceeding love, when they approached his wife.

And Dorcas, realizing his love, realizing, too, the cast iron underneath the velvet, had been swift to grasp the most essential fact of all: that such a man could not be changed, merely that his course might be deflected. She also grasped the belief that strength only can deflect strength, and she promptly was setting to work to gather up her force and resolution, ready to meet the issue, if it came. Not that she expected it to come; but merely because she must be prepared for any experience her life might offer. Just once had Fate taken her quite unawares, had dealt her what, save for Coit's opportune arrival on the scene, might easily have been a fatal blow. One such experience was quite enough. Hereafter, she would be tight-girt, ready for whatever came. As to the possibility of any real issue arising between herself and Coit, nothing was more unlikely. It was only that, less than a week after the marriage, Coit's "Whatever you say, dearest" had in some way made itself over into "I really think we might as well do so, my dear." And so, in fact, they might. It was a mere detail that Dorcas, listening, had now and then a vagrant wish that the real initiative might have seemed to come from her.

And yet, Coit never once had ceased to marvel at it that, in the end of it all, this brilliant young life had surrendered itself into his keeping; that his heart and his home both were

to be filled with the presence and the personality of Dorcas. His love for her, instead of being wasted and blunted by the long delay, instead of turning to a mere vague desire for the thing denied him because it was denied him, had gathered force and focus during the months that they had been apart. At the first, he had known merely that he loved Dorcas Sloane, nobly, overwhelmingly; now he knew just why it was he loved her, and the love waxed stronger for the knowledge. It had been a dizzying realization which had come upon him, that May day, when he had clasped her unresisting body in his arms. She was his, his own, in all her plastic, girlish freshness, his to adore and honour and to fashion gently to the mould of his desires. Logic is not born of moments such as those, so perhaps it was little wonder that Leonard Coit, rejoicing at the sudden yielding, took no thought of the physical prostration which had given it birth. To his maturer mind, she was a child, fresh, sweet, and wholly malleable.

It had been May when, seeing Dorcas walking before him at Pater's side, Coit had followed her home and, waiting a decent time after Pater's abrupt departure, had bribed the landlady to show him the way up to her room. His keen eyes had seen only too plainly that it was the hour for no half measures. Her lagging step, her drooping shoulders, a single glimpse of her wan, white face, as she had turned it up to Pater: these had been the danger signals which had taught him that, for the once, convention might best be shoved aside. He had made his way to her room, and then the rest had happened.

Before Dorcas had realized it, almost without her own volition, it was over. For good or ill, she had made her final choice. The rest of her life must henceforth be spent in making sure she never would regret the choice. With characteristic promptness, the first act of her returning strength had been to focus itself upon that proposition.

After all, the first facts had not been romantic. There had

been the shortest possible delay for emotional question and reply. Then Coit had offered her her hat and gloves, had led the way downstairs and called a cab. The driver knew his man; he had made record speed to the nearest high-class restaurant, and there together, over the urban equivalent of bread and wine, they had pledged their faith anew, while Coit, with hungry eyes, watched the slow return of life to Dorcas's gaunt, white cheeks and hollow, lack-lustre eyes whose old-time sparkle seemed to him for ever dead.

Later, frowning a little, he had listened to the main outlines of her story. Dorcas, speaking, took grateful note of the fact that he asked no questions, only allowed her to tell him anything she chose. As result, her choice was to tell him all of it, save for a few of the details, such as those which concerned her tonic, details which she judged as too unlovely to add much to his enjoyment. When she had ended her story, at once and very gently he took her back to her own old room. There, it swiftly had been agreed, she was to remain until he had had time to wire to Nina Oliver, and to get back Nina's answer. Three days later, when Dorcas went to Nina Oliver, Buddha went, too, packed safely in a nest of tissue papers in the tray of a rather empty trunk.

Less than a month afterwards, Dorcas Sloane became Dorcas Coit, and sailed away for a European honeymoon. Coit's hand was on her shoulder, as they stood together in the steamer's stern, and watched the city fade away into a patch of violet haze.

"Just a year, to-day, since I came here," Dorcas reminded him thoughtfully.

He turned on her with a sudden passion which he found it hard to keep in check.

"If only it had never been!" he said, with unaccustomed violence.

But her chin lifted itself, as she shook her head.

"No," she contradicted soberly. "Without it, my life would always have lacked one thing."

His eyes rested on her fondly.

"Not if I could give it to you," he protested.

"You could n't."

He dreaded to ask the inevitable question, mindful of her answer of the year before. Nevertheless, he ventured it.

"What is it, Dorcas?"

Even before she spoke, her smile told him that she had read the secret of his hesitation.

"Last year, I told you that it was success," she answered him. "Now, though, I have learned to know it by another name."

"And that?"

"Is comprehension," she told him gravely, as her hand slid underneath his arm.

A little later on, when the city had quite vanished in the distance, she broke the silence which had come between them.

"Leonard," she said, with slow, sweet insistence on each syllable; "I know that you are very good to me."

An hour afterward, when he came to join her in their cabin, Coit found her busy with their joint possessions. Buddha, however, was already seated on a lofty shelf, his trunk outstretched in elephantine benediction. Coit regarded the broadcloth beast in open astoundment.

"Where did that brute come from?" he demanded.

Her hands full of ivory-backed brushes, Dorcas glanced up to meet his words.

"How disrespectful, Leonard! That is Buddha," she chided him.

Coit nodded casually at the gray cloth effigy, as he flung himself into a chair.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, old man! But how did he get here, Dorcas? I did n't see him, when we went through the flowers."

"No; I brought him in my bag. Don't you remember him, Leonard, that day in my room?" Her voice seemed strangely wishful, as if some dear friend had received a slight.

Coit shook his white head, smiling, the while, into the wistful eyes of his wife.

"No, dearest. I only saw you, that day," he told her, as he put out his hand and drew her to his side. Then, after an interval, he asked her, "But what do you mean to do with the fellow here?"

"Take him with me."

Coit's brows rose.

"All over Europe? Remember what vagrants we are going to be, Dorcas."

She smiled; but her answer came with some spirit.

"All over Africa, if need be. Leonard, you can never understand just what it is that Buddha has been to me. One can't, unless he goes through it; but I shall take him with me always, no matter where I go."

Happy, handsome in his happiness, Coit leaned back in his chair and laughed like a veritable boy. When he could speak, —

"Jealousy is my besetting sin, Dorcas," he told her. "I'm warning you of it at the start, so you'd best beware."

Nevertheless, despite his warning, Buddha had travelled with them over half of Europe, and Buddha was now settled on a teak-wood bracket, high above the table in Dorcas's own dressing-room. Whether her old loyalty to her broad-cloth friend had endured the change in her fortunes, or whether she found it restful now and then, in all her present luxury, to lift her eyes to this reminder of her old, meagre days, Dorcas Coit was far too busy to analyze. Down underneath both reasons, though, defying all her efforts at analysis, there was a little streak of superstition, of linking the elephant with the innate ideals of the life which, her courage born anew, she was now planning to work out along such different lines. Just what direction those same lines would take, as yet, however, she had had no leisure to determine. For the past three months, it had taken all there was of her to adapt herself, not only to her changed surroundings, but,

still more, to the ideal of herself she had been quick to read in Leonard Coit's brown eyes.

It was in pursuance of this policy of adaptation that Dorcas, nodding to the maid to remove the tray, put the apparently idle question, —

“Who are the Braithwaites, Leonard?”

He looked across for her permission, before striking a match. She nodded, pleased that three months of married life should not have blunted the edge of his deference.

“Braithwaite is our treasurer,” he told her then.

Dorcas nodded again, this time in comprehension. Weeks since, she had become aware that *our*, on Coit's lips, referred to the great electric company of which he was at once the president and the moving spirit.

“So it will be an official function?” she queried lightly.

“Yes, and no. There'll be a good variety of people there. Rica will see to that. She's a born hostess.”

“Rica?”

“Mrs. Braithwaite.” Coit broke off his point of ash. “We went to school together. In fact, half of our present set did. As result, we all know each other by our given names. Rica Braithwaite was my first love. I pounded her husband, when we all were small, because he threw her best doll into a puddle.”

“Her husband was another?” Dorcas was ashamed of her little pang of envy, as she put the question.

Coit read the secret of the pang, and spoke quickly.

“He had n't the enterprise to get outside, as I have done, Dorcas. You must be generous, though, and try not to think of us as narrow.”

Her colour came at his swift interpretation of her mood.

“I ought to learn generosity, Leonard,” she told him gently. “You never forget to show me how great it can be made. But, about this dinner: I suppose it will be a formal function?” Her accent was of question.

“Probably. Rica is n't casual; she always goes in for a

good deal of form and ceremony. Besides that, it is given as a welcome to my bride. As you say, it is almost an official function; and it will be all the more so, very likely, because it is about the last one she will give."

"Why is that? Are they going away?"

Coit shook his head, while he tossed aside his burnt-out cigarette.

"Braithwaite is resigning at the next directors' meeting."

"Really? Or did you expect it?" Her voice completed the antithesis.

"It has been on the cards now, for some time," Coit said, with a carelessness which seemed to Dorcas just a little studied. "It has n't been quite certain, until now, just when it would come off; but I believe it's all settled now."

"Will they leave here, then?" Dorcas queried, less from interest in the Braithwaite plans than from a courteous absorption in what could not fail to be a business concern of her husband, and so a matter of concern to herself as well.

"I think Braithwaite has n't made up his mind. But really, Dorcas, now you think of it," Coit turned to smile at her, his handsome face alight with whimsical fun; "you must confess that you've not given me much time, the past three months, to think about such small matters as mere business."

She laughed, while, rising, she crossed the verandah and seated herself upon the railing at his side. The pose suited her girlish figure, and he watched her in thoughtful contentment as she sat there, balancing herself lightly on the rail, her thin frock flowing to the floor about her, and the sun full in her face and on her bright brown hair. Seen thus, it seemed impossible that any taint of weariness or lack of courage could ever have risen up to smirch her buoyant youth.

"Guilty!" she was saying merrily. "Worse, I am glad of it. It won't do you any hurt to take three months of vacation, every year. What's more, I am going to see that you do it. For — three — months — every year," she measured

off the words with mocking deliberation; "you and I and Buddha will go off a-gypsyng, quite by ourselves. Only," she frowned in sudden meditation; "only it does seem a great shame that, when you come home, rested, you should have to lose it all, with the fuss of breaking in a new treasurer." Like the clever woman that she was, she had been quick to learn that every man is pleased to be regarded as the active, practical force of his whole environment, no matter whether it is a question of saving souls or coining dollars.

Coit was no exception to the rule. He smiled, albeit he put in a perfunctory disclaimer.

"I don't do the breaking, Dorcas; I leave that to the next man in line. However, I fancy that the new treasurer is n't going to need much breaking."

"You have chosen him, then?" Dorcas still spoke out of her theory of masculine enjoyment, much as she would have patted the head of a friendly dog. She had no notion that her words struck full on the bull's-eye of the situation.

Neither did Coit intend that she should get that notion.

"Yes. It also seems written on the cards that the place goes to Gordon," he said casually.

"Gordon?"

Coit nodded.

"He's coming home, next month, you know."

Dorcas also nodded. She did know that Coit's one child, Gordon, whom they had met abroad, was returning to America, next month, to take his place again in his father's home. And yet, —

"Is n't there something a little bit incongruous in the notion of Gordon's settling down to business?" she inquired, as there flashed into her mind the picture of the great, jovial boy with whom she had become such chums, in those few days at Vevay.

Carelessly Coit wandered off with her along this side track.

"After all, he's bound to do something, Dorcas," he said. "I can't have him loafing about town, doing nothing; it

would set the ghosts of all our Puritan ancestors to wagging their skulls in consternation. Gordon is n't exactly fitted to be a drone, or even a grind. Still, he is n't so much more irresponsible than any other youngster of his age; and, with a few of us older men to hold him in, he is n't likely to cut up many business capers, once he really settles into harness."

Dorcas's laugh interrupted his meditative phrases.

"Please to remember that the irresponsible youngsters of his age include your venerable wife," she bade him gayly.

Stretching out his hand, he laid it above her fingers where they clasped the rail. There was infinite courtliness in the gesture, but infinitely more affection.

"You are of any age you choose to make yourself," he told her; "Gordon's or mine." Then, like an afterthought, he added, in quite another tone, "Dorcas, you can't think how glad I am that you and Gordon hit it off so well. Even if the boy did act a dunce about our marriage, I could n't help being a little sorry for him, after all. He was desperately sure it was going to upset things for him, here at home, desperately sure that it was his duty as a son to hate his father's second wife, all the more because she was of an age that ought to have made her his best playmate. It's over now and settled at last, thank Heaven! I shall never forget that last afternoon, before he met us. It seemed to me it dragged itself out into a thousand hours."

"Nor I." Dorcas spoke slowly, her voice heavy with the weight of reminiscence.

"You felt it, too?" Coit asked her quickly.

Slipping from the rail, she faced him, her hands clasped tight behind her. She looked a mere child, as she stood there beside him in the westering sun, which struck full on her burnished coils of hair, full on the snow-white head of Leonard Coit, her husband. Childlike was the simplicity of her reply.

"How could I help it, when I knew there was the chance he could come in between us?"

"You were my wife," Coit reminded her.

"And he was your son. It was possible, and the very possibility made me shudder. However," her eyes met his eyes in frank gladness; "that possibility is ended now."

"Yes," he echoed; "it is ended now. Once for all, Dorcas, you ended it, that first night, and Gordon is your loyal chum and slave. Do you know," he added thoughtfully; "Lanier used to say that, of all the people he had ever known, Gordon had the greatest possibility for loyalty."

"Except his father?" Dorcas queried, for their honeymoon was still a recent memory. Then she added, as she turned away, "Who is Lanier?"

"Lanier?" Coit spoke almost absently. "He is my brother-in-law. Did n't you know?"

And Dorcas, crossing the verandah to put herself into the hands of her maid, shook her head in careless denial. She had yet to find out that the personality of Lanier, if not his name, was already full to her of countless associations.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE Braithwaite dinner, albeit of the nature of an official function, was losing nothing of social charm upon that score. Dorcas admitted as much to herself when, at her husband's side, she went slowly down the stairs and halted just within the door of the great drawing-room.

A dozen guests were there, awaiting her, guests so resplendent that Dorcas gave up an instant to thankful communications with Providence, in that she had allowed her maid to hook her into her best frock. Dorcas had doubted; but the maid had been insistent, and the event had justified the maid. The frock was of filmy lace, yellow with age, and touched here and there with the bits of brown which invariably marked her costumes. It was very sumptuous; but Coit's eyes, when she had come to him, waiting in the hall below, had shown his complete approval of the choice.

"Am I too fine?" she asked him, halting before him, as a little child might have done.

He had bent to kiss her cheek.

"My dear, finery suits you, and you are charming," he told her, in a voice that brought the hot blood to her face. Then he added, in quite a different tone, "Where is Buddha?"

"Buddha?" Her face showed that she was mystified.

"Yes. I thought you always took him with you." And, the laugh still on his lips, he laid her cloak across her bare shoulders, and led the way out to the waiting carriage.

If the Coit house was massive in its dignity, that of the Braithwaites was sumptuous. Envious people, looking on, insisted that Arnold Braithwaite lived beyond his income;

but as they neither knew just what was his income, nor what his monthly bills, their opinion was generally discounted by the fortunate few who shared his hospitality. The fact of the matter was, however, that he had built an expensive house, and ran it on an expensive basis. He had his servants out from England, his wines from Italy, and his horses from the Blue Grass regions of Kentucky. His neckties, his friends, and his cigars were chosen by his wife, and good.

After that, there is no need to say that Rica Braithwaite was a clever woman. Moreover, as does not always happen, she concealed the fact beneath the impassive exterior of a Paris doll. Outwardly, she was a plump, fair woman of the early forties, looking ridiculously young to be the mother of the tall girl in white beside her, as young as Arnold Braithwaite, at her other side, looked old.

The same envious people, looking on, commented a little, now and then, as they watched the early graying of Arnold Braithwaite's thick brown hair, the deepening lines that ran vertically across his forehead and the other lines that bracketed his lips. There was no especial reason, they told each other, while they wagged their heads a little, that any man in his position, treasurer of the largest corporation in the city, father of five hearty children and husband of a woman like Rica Braithwaite, should age so prematurely. If he only had to face their worries and their limitations, there might be some reason in it. And his wife, placid in her great prosperity, was there to give the lie to any chance suggestion of worries matrimonial. Still, the last year had told on Arnold Braithwaite; even his best friends admitted that.

To every one concerned, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that the Braithwaites should give the dinner welcoming Dorcas Coit to her new home. The Braithwaites not only were among the earliest friends of Leonard Coit; but Arnold Braithwaite was, to all intents and purposes, his second in command, the power who stepped upon the throne during Coit's frequent absences from town. To be sure,

Braithwaite was on the eve of resignation; but society at large was ignorant of the fact, and regarded him as being almost as much of a fixture as was the corporation that he served, and helped to rule, as treasurer. Even in Coit's presence, the grasp of Braithwaite was far more obvious. He held the lines in his naked fist; Coit touched them deftly with gloved fingers. The quality of the touch, however, annulled the other difference.

At first sight, Dorcas liked Arnold Braithwaite. Even in his manifest prosperity, despite his smile of welcome, his air of easy proprietorship in all that lay around him, he made a curious appeal to her feminine sympathies. She felt the minor key behind the cheery smile; he seemed to her slightly ineffective, notwithstanding his apparent mastery of the scene. Apart from that, perhaps a little bit on account of it, she found him wholly likable. Rica, upon the other hand, she accepted with a reservation. Her charm was a little too apparent, too satisfactory to herself. It was like her youthful bloom, a trifle too insistent to be quite becoming. Dorcas, smiling and cordial, yet measured her with critical eyes; assenting to her easy chatter, she all the time was mentally contrasting her with the downright simplicity of certain of her older friends, of Dickie, for instance, and of Dickie's sister. They were solid oak, sturdy and strong. This dainty woman in her frills and furbelows was like a bit of lacquer, polished by generations of careful use. Dorcas admitted the value of the polish; but she confessed to herself a vagrant desire to scratch the surface and discover for herself what lay beneath. Long afterwards, she did discover, and confessed herself as fully satisfied. Contrary to the almost universal theory, it is not veneering alone that takes the highest polish.

Meanwhile, as two such women will, they chatted lightly, the while they were measuring their swords. Dorcas, asked, could not have told why Rica Braithwaite interested her so keenly; but, on her own side, Rica was quite well aware of

the reason for her interest in Dorcas Coit. She knew that certain chapters of her future history might well lie in the hands of Dorcas. Now she was watching those hands keenly, to discover if they would be supple as well as strong.

Between two women of acute brain and active nerve, much can be determined in the space of half a minute. To the others, looking on, there was no hint of all this analytic battle. Instead, it seemed the work of hardly an instant that, the greetings and the introductions ended, Rica Braithwaite was starting her guests in the direction of the dining-room.

At the table, the talk was of the world, worldly. It glittered like the brave array of crystal and silver spread out before the guests; it wandered to and fro across the face of half the world; it dallied with Anglo-German politics, and it played with the social programme of the winter opening out before them. All the guests but Dorcas addressed each other by their first names; all of them seemed equally familiar with Braithwaite's servants and his wines; all of them appeared to take their pleasures in common. It was the close communion of the small city, where the population is made up of the Descendants of a Dozen Families, and some others, and where the others are wholly negligible.

To Dorcas, it was an experience that taxed her brains to the uttermost. Notwithstanding her three months' training in the impersonal social life of the large hotels where they had spent their honeymoon, this was her first real dinner party. The question of the proper disposition of her gloves rivalled that of the sequence of her silver, whether she should eat out or in. There were other questions, too, that concerned the relative importance of the guests to which her bridal precedence offered her no clue. Arnold Braithwaite was a clever talker and a gracious host; nevertheless, it was with a distinct sense of perilous duty safely done that Dorcas found herself once more in the drawing-room. There Rica Braithwaite joined her almost immediately.

"You can't think, Mrs. Coit, how good it is going to be to have The Terraces open again."

Dorcas looked up a little bit defensively.

"I thought Mr. Coit had never closed it," she said.

"Oh, after a fashion, not; but, after all, it was closed for all practical purposes. A man, all by himself, never really entertains, you know. His servants cook a dinner, and he asks his man friends to come in and eat it; but that's another matter entirely. However, now —" Her smile and gesture completed her unspoken sentence.

"It is a charming old place," Dorcas remarked, rather more because some such remark seemed to be expected of her, than because she felt the observation to be telling or original.

"Charming!" Rica assented. "In the old days, it was the centre —" She checked herself, with something as near to embarrassment as she was ever known to show.

Dorcas accepted the situation simply. After all, why not? There could have been no apparent discourtesy to herself in the fact of Leonard Coit's first marriage, since it was evident to all the world that she herself had not been born at the time. Moreover, it suited Dorcas Coit that, at her coming, her predecessor in the home should not be relegated to the limbo of forgotten things.

"Was the first Mrs. Coit fond of entertaining?" she asked composedly.

Rica Braithwaite registered her full approval of the composure.

"Surely — But, of course, you never met her. Yes, she kept the house full of people, all the time. She was not magnetic in the least, though. We really went there for the sake of Leonard, and of Duncan Lanier, her brother."

"He lived there?" Dorcas felt it was her part to betray a proper degree of interest, yet she put the question idly, her mind busy upon the woman at her side.

"Not all the time. He came and went, until — until the

trouble. We all were so fond of him, too," Rica Braithwaite added a bit inconsequently.

"Were? Is he dead?"

Rica's brows arched themselves. Then, with some haste, she changed the subject.

"You have had a delightful summer?" she said, with an abruptness of transition which caught Dorcas's vagrant attention and set her to wondering about its cause. "According to Leonard's letters to my husband, you must have wandered off into all manner of unlikely places, quite away from the ordinary tourist trail. And he wrote us that you had a glimpse of Gordon."

Dorcas's face lighted.

"You know Gordon, of course! Is n't he a darling?" she asked impetuously.

Rica glanced at her husband's portrait, hanging above the mantel.

"Yes, we know him very well," she assented quietly. "He and Betty have grown up here, side by side."

"And you know he is coming home, this month?" Dorcas asked her, still a little eagerly.

A sudden curious blankness came into Rica Braithwaite's smile.

"Yes, I know," she said, and her voice all at once sounded heavy, inert. When she spoke again, however, her tone had regained its customary animated cadence. "You have no idea, Mrs. Coit, how we cared for Gordon. He was in and out here, all through the time of his growing up. He is the very apple of his father's eye, whatever the old phrase may mean; and we all of us hoped, once he was out of college, The Terraces would wake up and be alive once more. Instead, Gordon went off to Europe; and we have been waiting for you to come and wake up the dear old place."

"Waiting?" Dorcas spoke inquiringly, and the inquiry bore its own note of quiet sarcasm. Even apart from the renewed insistence upon the social duties opening out before

her, she had her own grave doubts as concerned the waiting.

Rica sought to remove the doubts.

"Yes, waiting," she iterated, with smiling insistence. "Do you see that great girl in white, over there, that Betty of mine? She was to have come out, this summer. Instead, I waited — really, I am very frank, you see — until I could have your moral backing in the great event."

As yet, the social training of Dorcas had been far too short to teach her the inadvisability of laughter. Her laugh came now, bubbling over all her sense of still decorum.

"My dear Mrs. Braithwaite," she said merrily; "I wonder if you realize that your moral backer has never yet come out, herself."

"But —"

Dorcas repressed her mirth and spoke with utter non-chalance.

"Oh, as for that, I suppose I'm out. I did n't come out, though; I just leaked out, the way most of us college girls do."

Rica breathed a short sigh of relief. An ominous and mirthful gleam in Dorcas's eyes had suggested the sudden fear that the bride might be offering herself as candidate for a coming-out party. The sense of humour was not strongly developed in the mind of Rica Braithwaite; perchance it had been crowded out by other and even nobler qualities. Now, in her relief, she failed to choose her next words with a proper degree of care.

"How droll you are, Mrs. Coit!" she said.

And Dorcas retreated into her shell, taking with her the distinct sense of having been patted on the head.

"Is Miss Braithwaite to come out soon?" she asked formally.

"Betty," Rica corrected quickly. "She never can be *Miss Braithwaite* to the wife of Leonard Coit. Yes, I count on introducing her, next month; that is, if you can spend the time to help me through it all."

Dorcas glanced about the elaborate room, where the guests, all but herself, seemed so absolutely at home.

"Really, it does n't seem to me you need much help," she answered, more in her usual tone; "and I shall be only a figure head at best, I am afraid. However, if I can be —"

"You can. In fact, I have been counting on you, and holding all my plans open, until I could have the chance to talk to you about it. Of course, there will be no end of little things to decide on later; but, now I have seen you, I can go ahead with the main outlines of the plans. You don't know how grateful to you I am, Mrs. Coit." Rica rose, and stood smiling down upon her guest who, in the veiled light of the drawing-room, looked scarcely younger than herself. "I shall count on it for early in the month."

A sinister thought flashed into the brain of Dorcas.

"Gordon!" she said to herself.

The next instant, she rebuked herself for the thought. Rica was continuing her speech, her head held high, her voice quite steady, but an unwonted glitter in her eyes.

"You probably may not know it, Mrs. Coit; but Mr. Braithwaite is resigning his position, this next month. No," for Dorcas involuntarily flung a glance backward across her shoulder; "it can't be kept a secret, so very much longer. Still, I have not spoken of it yet, except to you; I knew, by way of Mr. Coit, you could not fail to be among the first to hear of it, in any case. As I say, he is going to resign, perhaps to go out of active business for a little while. He —" her eyelids flickered; "he has n't been quite well of late; his business has been coming on his nerves and I —" again the curious flickering of her steady, smiling glance; "I have quite insisted on it that he should take some sort of a real vacation. But, of course, after his being in the one thing so long, any change is bound to be talked over, and it seemed to me wiser to have Betty safely launched, before we had to face the inevitable discussion. I'm sure you see it, too. But here come the husbands."

She rustled away to meet them, leaving Dorcas quite assured that she did not see it in the very least, save on the surface. Rica Braithwaite was not a woman to talk at random. Of the hidden sources of her confidences, Dorcas Coit as yet could gain no notion. The most palpable one of all, she had dismissed almost as soon as it had offered itself for her consideration. Rica Braithwaite might have her maternal eye on Gordon for her Betty; but that comparatively simple matter she could be trusted to engineer for herself. There were other motives at work, motives which Dorcas could not fathom. Neither, from her present observations, could she fathom the nature of the relation likely to develop between Rica Braithwaite and herself. It was a slightly troubled face that she turned to greet her husband when, with Arnold Braithwaite by his side, he came striding across the room to join her. There was protection in his presence, and a sense of proprietorship which, for the hour, was very sweet. After the complexity of these new inmates of her life, it was restful to lie back upon the simple sense of his enwrapping love.

Something of this she said to Coit, as they were walking homeward under the light of the September stars. In view of the shortness of the distance and of the beauty of the night, Dorcas had vetoed his suggestion of telephoning for the carriage, and, her long train wrapped about her like a sheath, she had crossed the lawn at her husband's side. For some reason she felt loath to analyze, she needed the tonic of the walk. Physical exercise seemed wholesome to her, after the glow and the gorgeousness of the Braithwaite home. It was not exactly artificial; it was merely a trifle too highly coloured for her perfect liking. If only it had taken itself a little bit more simply, it and Rica, Dorcas would not have had the vague sense of having proved an absolute misfit. Was it because they all seemed to be laying such exceeding stress upon the things of which, heretofore, she had known so little? Was it all superficial froth, or were there tides, deep and still, flowing underneath, tides of which at present

she was ignorant, but which, one day, would catch her up upon their ebb and flow?

"But you like Rica?" her husband questioned keenly.

The answer came at once.

"I admire her intensely."

Under the starlight, she could see him smiling.

"It is n't the same thing, by any means, Dorcas," he assured her. "After all, though, I think I understand. When one first meets her, Rica Braithwaite seems like a woman playing chess, with all the other women as her pawns."

Dorcas nodded, without troubling herself to give a verbal assent.

"And afterwards?" she queried.

The fervour of his tone surprised her, although it was devoid of any accent which might have called forth her latent jealousy.

"Afterward, one finds out his mistake. Rica Braithwaite is a thing of ice and fire; she has no middle moods. She's clever, too. She has made her husband, modelled him like a bit of clay, and then has kept a firm grip on him to hold him to the shape that she has fashioned. Without her, he'd have gone under, long ago."

"Gone under?"

"Financially."

She looked at him, and Coit was astonished at the horror in her eyes.

"Leonard! Is that the reason for his resignation?"

His face was in shadow now; but her alert ear caught the change in his voice, as he answered, —

"Oh, no. Nothing of that sort, Dorcas. I only meant that he would have swamped them both by his extravagance."

She smiled again, this time as if for her own imaginings.

"Oh, if that is all. Of course, it's bad enough; but I hate dishonour, and, in that beautiful home and with their pretty daughter —" Her voice trailed into silence.

Coit broke it, pointing to the lights which were gleaming

down upon them from the front windows of The Terraces, now rising sharply just before them.

"It looks as if the servants were holding high carnival within," he said, as they turned in along the walk which led to the front door. "It's just as well that —"

A sudden hail cut athwart the evening air. An instant later, Gordon Coit, huge, hilarious, swept down upon them from the verandah.

"Is this the way you greet the returned prodigal?" he demanded, as he gripped a hand of each. "Yes, this is really myself, here in the flesh, not a ghost come to warn you of my untimely passing. I took an early steamer, landed, this morning, and walked in on you, to find you gone. After all my efforts to give you a joyous surprise, I must say it was disappointing. How are you, dad? Glad to see me, mama?" And, bending down, he bestowed on Dorcas a resounding smack. Then, turning to the verandah, where the red end of a cigar announced the presence of another unexpected guest, he casually added, "Uncle Duncan is up there, dad. I met him in New York, this noon, and coaxed him to come on up here with me. From all accounts, he's about as much a stranger at The Terraces as I am, myself."

Leonard Coit's comment was inaudible, while he went striding up the final stretch of gravelled walk; but Dorcas could feel his fingers tighten on her arm, as he helped her up the steps. An instant later, just as they came into the patch of light before an open window, she heard Gordon's hearty voice introducing, —

"My uncle, Mr. Lanier."

Dorcas looked up to give him greeting; but her brown eyes, meeting Lanier's eyes, wavered and fell away. In this unexpected guest, this quasi relative to whom both Rica Braithwaite and her own husband had made brief reference, Dorcas Coit was finding herself face to face once more with Pater's red-haired friend.

CHAPTER TWELVE

By good rights, summer should have been left entirely in the background. Nevertheless, as often happens in the southern New England September, the next morning dawned warm and breathless as the dogdays. Not a breeze stirred the arching elms on the lawn, and the hot red flowers on the terrace stared up unblinkingly at the hot red sun. Dorcas, standing on the steps of the verandah, clasped her hands above her eyes for shelter, as she watched Gordon and her husband out of sight.

Gordon was accompanying his father to the office, that first morning. The two men looked a pair of happy boys, as they tramped away together, Coit's white head barely on a level with Gordon's ear. Dorcas smiled to herself, while she looked after them. Her lonely, orphaned life had never known an intimacy such as this; it was good to watch them, father and son, to see their frank joy in their meeting, their moments of absorption, each in the interests of the other. It was better still to Dorcas, being the woman that she was, acutely conscious that she was the new-comer in the family circle, to see the way that, every now and then, the mutual absorption was consciously broken down, in order to call her to come inside their interests and share them.

In this, Gordon was quite as thoughtful as his father. Dorcas, indeed, suspected that the great, jovial boy would be thoughtful in most things. To all intents and purposes, Gordon was a boy, healthy, hearty, irresponsible. He was uncommonly good to look at, six feet three, broad-shouldered,

sinewy and dark. He was equally good to know and talk to, not so much for the calibre of his brains as for the little air of alert attention that he bestowed on his companion of the moment. Best of all, considering all things, he was curiously unspoiled. He took the good things of life quite simply, as his natural right, enjoyed them, shared them with the next man, and then forgot them totally. Side by side, in temperament the two men were oddly suggestive of the stalk and the brilliant flower, each incomplete without the other. And Dorcas, looking on and recognizing their joint completeness, was broad enough to rejoice that it was so.

In spite of the blazing sun, she stood there long, gazing after them, her hands clasped above her eyes and the sleeves of her pongee morning gown slipping backward to show her round, bare arms. Seen against the long perspective of the verandah posts, she made a pretty picture; and Duncan Lanier, strolling out through the broad front hall, stopped for a moment in the doorway, to study her at his ease.

The night before, Lanier had been conscious of a little awe of Dorcas, as she had stepped forward to welcome him, clothed in her sumptuous gown, clothed, too, in a stately dignity which had taken its note from the greeting bestowed on him by Leonard Coit. Her head held high, her fingertips just barely meeting his, then falling away again to rest in the folds of rare old lace, her lips smiling a little, but her brown eyes gazing gravely at him in a look he could not read, Dorcas Coit had seemed to him a haughty little dame of ripening years and of experience already ripened. She had given him just the proper degree of greeting, had asked a question or two, had expressed a wish or two concerning his treatment from the servants and the length of his stay at The Terraces. Then she had turned away, to join the babble of which Gordon was the centre; and Lanier, left slightly to himself, was free to look her over and decide what manner of woman it might be who had been chosen to fill the place

of his dead sister. That she would fill it, the remarks of Gordon Coit had left him little room for doubt.

Lanier admired her from the start. Not so many women in her place, he told himself, could have achieved the absolute calmness of her assumption that on her, as mistress of The Terraces, rested the onus of his real welcome. She was attractive, even though her dignity of the moment might render her a little bit forbidding; her repose suggested to him age-old generations of most formal living. All in all, granted his own standards of gentility, Lanier could not do otherwise than admire her. His admiration would have been immeasurably greatened, however, had he known the tumult of feeling that raged within her, had he been aware that her still, chill dignity was the unfamiliar mask which she had snatched up to cover from his eyes her consciousness, not only of their former meetings, but of the hours on hours that she had given up to the study of his hypothetical individuality. She had treated him as a random sample of a type; she had sought to make that sample, garnished forth properly, yield her not only her daily bread, but a generous covering of jam as well. Naturally enough, now that the episode and its subsequent failure were buried in the past, she found it distinctly disconcerting to have the sample of the type appearing as an individual who had all sorts of social affiliations with her new home. Her manner was glacial; but her eyes, to one who knew her well, would have betrayed her inner fire. Back of the whole situation, past and present, lay the indubitable fact that her mind would never have pounced upon Lanier as a workable type, had it not yielded to an instant charm that he had held for her.

Lanier had gone to bed, the short remnant of the evening ended, trying in vain to reconcile Gordon's description of Dorcas with the actual fact. He went to sleep at last, tired with his inability to link them at any point. Next morning, though, watching her in the sunshine, Dorcas appeared to

him infinitely younger, infinitely less formidable. Her simpler gown was in part accountable for this change, that and the girlish unconsciousness of her pose, leaning forward, her elbows on the rail. In part, it came from the smile which still remained about her lips, after the mocking farewells she had exchanged with Gordon, as long as their voices could carry across the intervening distance. For the rest, Lanier took deliberate note of the oval face whose creamy skin was slightly stained with scarlet on the cheeks, of the vivid eyes beneath their arching brows, and of the shining hair drawn simply backward from the face, to crown the delicately modelled head with high-piled, burnished coils. So far had he gone in his deliberate enumeration of Dorcas's attractions, when the girl, by some subtle sense become aware of his scrutiny, turned suddenly to confront him.

On her side, she saw a tall and well-knit figure, lean and not over wiry, a thatch of bright red hair above a face whose other features lost themselves beside the singularly warring elements of eyes and lips, the one so keen, the other slightly wavering. She noted that the hands were long, lean and well cared for, that his grooming was beyond criticism in each least detail. And, meanwhile, without perceptible pause or hesitation, she came slowly towards him, dropped into a chair and, with an imperious little gesture, beckoned him to the chair beside her.

Smiling, he obeyed. His smile, however, would have been a shade less careless, had he known that the little assumption of imperiousness, resting so easily upon her, was a legacy from the days of early spring when she had looked upon this man beside her as a child of her own brain, created only to dance at her own piping.

His first remark was tamer than she had expected of him.

"Gordon is so happy to be at home again."

"No happier than Leonard is to have him," she said defensively, and then, an instant later, wondered why she had thought it necessary to be so truculent.

Lanier smiled lazily.

"And you?" he queried.

"I, of course. Gordon is such a darling. I saw him abroad, you know."

"You had n't met him until then?"

Again his words irritated her oddly. This time, it seemed to her they held the implication she had felt from Rica Braithwaite, that Coit had gone outside his customary radius, when he had chosen her to be his wife.

"He was away, at the time of our wedding."

Lanier nodded.

"I remember. How exactly like Coit it all was: the deliberate making up his mind, and then the marrying you in such a grand rush that we none of us could even get a peep at you, before he lugged you off to Europe! It's Coit, all over, Mrs. — May I call you *Dorcas*?" His brown eyes looked at her frankly. "You see, you're any amount younger than I am; and, besides, after a fashion, we are next of kin. You truly don't mind?"

How could she say she minded, although his easy assumption of the nameless tie between them matched her own knowledge of that other nameless tie of which she was now aware with such uncomfortable keenness? The attendant agonies of those long weeks when, starved and weary, she had toiled away at her poor little novel, had branded its pages for ever on her mind, had invested them with a sense of reality that no well-fed, successful author is ever destined to experience. And the novel had centred about one single, dominating figure whose prototype was seated now beside her, speaking to her with the smile and accent she had taught herself to know so well. For Dorcas, more by chance than out of any skill in analytical construction, had built up the figure of her hero, not only true to life, but living, the counterpart of all that, as she saw now, had then been lying hidden to her superficial glance. She had shown him, after her poor fashion, exactly as he really was; had cared

for him, during those weary, dreary weeks, as it was in her, perchance, to care for no other man. And now, by the very mockery of Fate, he was sitting there beside her on the sunny verandah of her new home, of the new home of Mrs. Leonard Coit, brother of the dead wife of her husband, a familiar member of the household, free to come and go at any hour; and he had just interrupted his most prosaic talk to remind her of a tie that lay between them. Strangest and strongest fact of all, however, seen thus face to face in the prosaic light of daily routine, she was still conscious of much of his old charm. Her passing irritability, in fact, had been but her innate womanly revolt before the consciousness. And yet, she would have seemed to be laying an undue stress upon the trivial thing, had she objected to his right to call her *Dorcas*.

Words take perceptible interval, while the brain works far more swiftly. Lanier went on, without a pause.

"You don't mind? Thanks." He nodded unconcernedly, although Dorcas felt the blood rising in her cheeks. "As I say, it's Coit, all over. He's slow in making up his mind. Once it is made, though, there's no standing out against him. It's a mercy that he's as clear-headed as he is determined. You were a friend of Miss Oliver, I think?"

Dorcas drew a quick breath of relief. For the moment, she felt it good to stand upon more tangible ground.

"We were classmates," she replied.

"Smith; was n't it? Yes, I do remember. You see, she is related to the Coits; I only knew her indirectly."

"You knew her, then?"

"I saw her, a few times. She used to be here, as a little child. Gordon and she were great chums in their salad days, used to play marbles all up and down the terrace. Then she grew up ahead of him, the way girls do; put up her pigtails and put down her frocks, and refused to play marbles any more. The poor boy never quite recovered from the blow." Lanier's laugh was singularly likable, low,

but very merry. "He will spite her to her dying day because, once on a time, she twitted him for being babyish."

"Gordon?"

"Yes. At fifteen, she had an attack of acute senility." He laughed again. "She used to be a pretty child. Did she live up to her youthful promise?"

Dorcas assented with some degree of warmth. Always she had liked Nina Oliver. Moreover, just entering into this new world of hers, it was good to meet some one who would talk of her old friends. She half resolved to turn the talk to Pater; then she held her peace. She must know Lanier far, far better than she did, before she could sit and gossip with him about dear old Pater, whose place within her life she would always keep so very sacred. Accordingly, she held her peace. Later on in that same day, she was glad that she had done so.

The day, warm at dawn, rose to a torrid zenith, then grew yet more torrid, as it waned towards the hour for tea. Coit had come home at luncheon time, confessing himself too much exhausted by the heat to spend the whole day in his office. Gordon had telephoned up from his club that he was lunching there; and Lanier, after an hour with Dorcas, had risen with a vague excuse and wandered off in search of old acquaintances. At tea, however, they all reappeared upon the verandah, Lanier in white flannels which set off to the very utmost his lean figure and his flaming hair. Dorcas, fresh from the hands of her maid, was the last one to join the group. Her coming seemed to bring with it a whiff of crisp, cool air, so lithe and dainty was she in her pale muslin gown.

Coit's eyes rested upon her proudly, as she came forward with deliberate step, nodding to Lanier and holding out a cordial hand to Gordon. Leonard Coit was no mean judge of social values. It was to him a matter of perpetual wonder that this untrained child, whom he had married, should all at once become the gracious lady, reposeful, even a little bit

imperious. He took no account of the schooling that life is bound to bring to one thrown upon her own resources, forced to wage a losing, albeit a plucky, fight against the world; a schooling the more potent, once it is grafted upon hereditary knowledge that one must be adaptable, even plastic, or else go to the wall entirely. Decades of ordinary living could never have taught to Dorcas Sloane the lessons that had been ground into her during those eleven short months. Moreover, another than Dorcas Sloane might not have learned them.

Cool and trim and dainty, then, Dorcas moved across the verandah, nodded to Lanier, gave her left hand to Gordon, slipping her right, the while, within the curve of Coit's arm, as the three men rose to greet her. Then she drew up the little table and beckoned to the maid who, the tray in her outstretched hands, stood waiting on the threshold. When the tray was in its place before her, —

"It's so intolerably warm, to-day," Dorcas said casually; "that I'm giving you your choice between hot tea, and iced. Leonard, which are you going to have?"

Coit, true to his traditions, chose the steaming brew, and Gordon followed his example. Dorcas laughed, as she turned to look across at Lanier.

"Are you following the fashion, Mr. Lanier? In that case, I shall get the credit of mere self-indulgence," she challenged him.

Lanier's smile answered to her challenge. Moreover, in that sultry afternoon, the clink of broken ice carried refreshment in its very sound. Nevertheless, he parried, and the fate of three lives hung on the outcome of that parrying.

"Is it just as good, cold?" he asked, with merry dubiousness.

"Just. In fact," Dorcas peered into the cut-glass jug before her; "I think it probably is a good deal better. I made it, myself, after my infallible old rule. That was the reason I was a little late."

"Then," Lanier spoke deliberately; "the cold, if you please, Dorcas."

And Dorcas poured it out. Her hand shook a very little, as she did so, for her quick eye had noted, what the other two had missed completely, the swift glance of cold displeasure with which her husband had received Lanier's use of her given name.

Gordon broke the little hush, broke it just as Lanier received the glass from Dorcas's outstretched hand.

"I was talking with Mr. Braithwaite, Uncle Duncan — I had him lunch with me, you know, by way of picking up a little information about my new career —"

His hand outstretched to meet that of Dorcas, Lanier looked up sharply.

"Your career, Gordon? What do you mean?"

"Did n't I tell you that he is stepping out, next month, and that the powers that be have ordained it that I am to take his place? No? I supposed you knew it, anyway."

This time, Lanier's sharp glance passed on, to rest on Coit.

"Is this your doing?" he made curt query. Then, as if to cover some latent irritation, he drew back his hand suddenly, and drank the tea at a breath.

Coit stirred his own tea lazily.

"Not especially my doing, Duncan, except as I shall have to accept the resignation when it comes to vote. It has been coming, this long time; in fact, he has been only holding down the place until Gordon came home to take it."

"Oh, hang it, dad!" Gordon broke in abruptly. "I hope you don't mean that I am ousting Mr. Braithwaite."

A curious light had come into Duncan Lanier's brown eyes, as he sat leaning back in his deep chair and thoughtfully twirling the scraps of ice which had fallen into his glass.

"It certainly does look a little bit that way, Gordon," he said, and his voice was as thoughtful as was the indolent motion of his hand.

Dorcas's quick ear caught the tinkle of the ice, and she set down her own glass.

"Let me fill it, Mr. Lanier," she urged him.

The same thoughtfulness was in his eyes, as he lifted them to her face in slow, deliberate scrutiny. Then, —

"Thank you, yes," he said quietly. "It is most — refreshing."

"I am glad you think so," Dorcas assented. "I always find it rests me, after a day like this. Is it sweet enough for you?"

"Quite." He toyed with his glass for a moment, his eyes now on the floating dots of ice; and Dorcas, idly watching, wondered at the intentness of his face. Then, when the second dot of ice had vanished, melted, he once more raised the glass, his thoughtfulness all gone, and bowed in merry mockery. "To you!" he said. "And to our friendship, in the days to come!"

Once more, Coit looked up sharply. This time, there was something besides displeasure in his gaze, something akin to anxious fear. The fear increased, as Lanier once more passed up his glass.

"I really am abominably thirsty," Lanier said, and, as he spoke, he laughed a shade more amusedly than it seemed to Dorcas that the case warranted. "I know I am at least a glass ahead of you; but this — tea — is so infernally good that I can't well help it."

This time, even Gordon became aware of the sudden angry glint in his father's eyes. His own eyes lost their boyish fun and grew keener, as he glanced from his father to his father's wife, dainty and unconcerned beside her tray, then on to Duncan Lanier, lounging carelessly in his deep chair, one foot thrust forward on the floor, one hand dropping inertly from his knee, while the other held the half-empty glass at which he now was smiling with loosely parted lips. Then suddenly Gordon's glance snapped back to the table, and he sprang to his feet.

"Dorcas! That confounded spirit lamp!" he said hastily. Then his accent changed. "I beg your pardon, Uncle Duncan! What a duffer I was to splash you into such a looking mess!" he said contritely; but a keener critic than Duncan Lanier, now looking half-perplexedly down upon his tea-splashed flannels, would have caught the note of relief beneath the expressed contrition.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IN the dark of that same evening, when Lanier was in his room and Coit was smoking in the library, Gordon stepped out on the verandah in search of Dorcas. He found her leaning on the rail, her bare arms supporting her chin, and her eyes upon the scattered city lights below.

"Dorcas," he asked abruptly and without preface; "what was in that tea?"

Without troubling herself to stir, she made careless answer, —

"Lemon, Gordon. Also sugar. What's the matter? Do you like it best with cream?"

Under cover of the dark, his impatient little gesture escaped her notice. Not so the increasing abruptness of his accent, however, as he asked again, —

"The iced tea, Dorcas? The stuff you and Uncle Duncan were drinking?"

This time, although without stirring otherwise, she turned her head to face him. Gordon could see the lazy mockery in her eyes.

"Stuff, Gordon? That's not polite," she rebuked him. "About the tea, I made it by the same old rule I always use. What's more, it was very good."

"Obviously." Gordon's tone was crisp and dry.

"What's the matter, Gordon? Are you sorry you did n't try it? No matter; if it's a warm day, I'll make some more, to-morrow," she reassured him lightly.

But he was not to be deterred from seeking answer to his original query.

"What was in it, Dorcas?" he persisted.

"Well, let me see: some tea, of course, just a very little." She paused, waiting in vain for him to share her laughter. Then, baffled by his unsmiling silence, she went on more hastily, "And some lemon, and sugar, and then a lot of rum."

"Oh!" The exclamation cut the air crisply. "And you call it *tea*." The crispness lost itself in measured and deliberate sarcasm.

Dorcas straightened up and faced him, her hands locked behind her. Her eyes showed her annoyance at his criticism; but her voice still held its lightness, as she answered, —

"Why not? One must call it something."

"Yes; but not —"

She interrupted him, angered a little by his insistence.

"And I saw you taking claret with your dinner," she added. "Do be consistent, Gordon."

His reply surprised them both by its quiet dignity.

"At least, I don't label my claret *ginger ale*," he told her.

"What difference?" she said rather coldly. Then she went on, in swift appeal, "Gordon, for goodness' sake, don't let us get on our nerves and fight about a little thing like that. I'll call the stuff concentrated wood alcohol, if you say so, rather than have you glower on me, the way you're doing now. After all, it's the thing that counts, not the name."

"Not always," Gordon told her steadily. "Besides, we mark our prussic acid with a skull and bones."

Once more Dorcas plumped her bare elbows on the rail, clasped her hands and eyed Gordon from above them with merry scrutiny.

"Gordon," she said; "it really is n't decent to absorb wine at seven, and lecture in behalf of prohibition before the clock strikes ten. I thought better of your logic than all that."

In his present serious mood, Gordon was not minded to enjoy her chaff. His eyes flashed suddenly; even in the

starlight, she could see the hard glint of anger in their depths.

"I'm not preaching prohibition, Dorcas," he told her curtly. "I take my ale at luncheon, and my wine at dinner; but, at least, I call them by their generally accepted names. It's a wholly different proposition to serve them out as tea."

"But everybody knows —"

"Everybody does n't," he cut in hotly. "I suppose it's what they call a woman's trick, the same sort of thing that leads her to say *Oh, mercy!* when she really means *Oh, damn!* Thank goodness, though, my life has been with men, who call things by —"

This time, Dorcas had straightened up in earnest, and eyed him with cold hostility.

"Gordon, I think you have forgotten yourself," she interrupted him imperiously. "I must ask you, out of courtesy to your father, to —"

Drawn up to his full height, his fists stuck into his pockets, Gordon looked down at her in boyish anger.

"There's no need of your trying to hide behind dad," he warned her bluntly. "He was fully as disgusted about it all as I was."

Dorcas's brows went upward.

"Disgusted?" she echoed, and the syllables fell from her lips like dainty, clean-cut icicles, hard and cold.

"Yes, disgusted. You must have seen what you did, known what you were going to do," Gordon broke out turbulently.

"What did I do?" Dorcas asked the question squarely.

The answer came back to her no less squarely.

"You came within an ace of making Uncle Duncan drunker than a fool."

"What!" Dorcas's recoil was no less at the crudeness of the phrase than at the bald, unlovely fact. Strangely enough, in talking with Lanier, that day, she had completely lost the memory of the night when Pater had led him from the crowded city car. Equally strange was it that, in her secret

perturbation over her husband's manifest displeasure, its final cause, the relaxed manliness of Lanier, had been completely disregarded. Gordon's hasty interference she had looked upon as a bit of puppy clumsiness, pure and simple. "You mean —" she began again, after a little pause.

Gordon cast a hasty glance up at the lighted windows just above their heads.

"Come out into the garden," he bade her shortly. "We can talk better there."

Nevertheless, once out under the open, starlit sky, he seemed to find it difficult to speak. For a while, they paced slowly along the walks which led in and out and up and down across the terraces, where the flowers hung their heads, now weighted heavily with dew. At first, Dorcas made no effort to help him across the difficulties of the start. She merely moved forward at his side, her frock brushing him every now and then, yet her whole self so curiously remote as to make him feel himself an outcast from her world. Beside her and towering far above her, Gordon stalked grimly along, his fists in his trouser pockets, his head held high in his boyish determination, not only to disregard her just annoyance, but also to hold fast to his own belief in his equally just remonstrance. Then, because sullenness was not within the nature of Gordon Coit, he spoke out, before he really meant to do it.

"Dorcas," he said a little bit appealingly; "I don't want to have a row with you; but — Surely, you knew about Uncle Duncan; did n't you?"

At his sudden change of accent, her eyes met his in friendly squareness.

"I knew there was such a person, Gordon."

"And — that was all?" he asked her.

She copied his accent, even to the little, hesitating break in the phrase.

"Yes — that was all," she told him; but her hesitation held a different meaning from his own. She justified it to

her downright, truth-loving self, by arguing that it was for Lanier to tell of that forgotten night with Pater, not for her.

When Gordon spoke again, his voice was level, explanatory.

"It's only this — for there's no use harping on details. From some source or other, Uncle Duncan was born with a craving for it, for any sort of alcoholic stuff he could get. What makes the matter worse, he'll go to pieces on one twentieth the amount it takes to knock out most men. He's born that way; he really can't help it."

"Can't!" It would be impossible for the word to hold more concentrated scorn.

"Can't," Gordon iterated firmly. "He does try, try with all his might and main, with all the manhood there is in him."

Watching her intently to mark the effect of his own pleading, Gordon could see the curling of her lips, as she assented quietly, —

"He must be manly."

Gordon's eyes blazed again. Then he controlled himself anew.

"He is, in every way but that. That he can't help. It's born in him, like the red of his hair. He does try, though. That's the reason I insist upon it that it's not fair to knock him out, when he is off his guard."

"You mean?"

Gordon's fingers shut upon the linings of his pockets, as he put the matter still more bluntly.

"That it's a bit contemptible, when a man has the grit to sit back and watch us drinking wine at dinner, to knock him out completely with a dose of doctored — tea." This time, Dorcas herself could have put no more scorn into a single word.

In face of such scorn, swiftly she came to her own defence.

"He must have known."

"How?" Again the accent of boyish indignation cut into her more placid speech.

"He must have smelled it. Besides, everybody does," she answered.

Gordon found her meaning clearer than her rhetoric. His answer was addressed to the former.

"Everybody does n't. And, as for his smelling it, he did n't. I was watching him; I just happened to be, not that I suspected any trouble. If you'll think back a minute, you'll remember that he was asking dad a question, and sat with the glass held out at arm's length, till all at once he gulped it down."

In her sheer nervousness, Dorcas giggled a little at the awkward phrase. Gordon turned upon her with fresh irritation.

"For heaven's sake, don't laugh about it, Dorcas!" he bade her, too angry now to heed the fact that it was his father's wife he was addressing. "The Lord only knows what lasting harm you may have done."

She sobered swiftly. Gordon, towering above her, stern with anger, was a force with which to reckon. Moreover, already she had come to care for this great, overgrown boy who, all at once and before her very eyes, was turning to the likeness of a man. She liked him, and she counted upon his loyalty and his companionship.

"What do you mean, Gordon?" she asked him.

"This: that Uncle Duncan told me, coming up here in the train, he'd been taking some sort of a cure; that, just so long as he kept his head and kept steady, he'd be all right. If once he let himself go, though —"

"Gordon," Dorcas questioned suddenly; "you spilled that tea on purpose?"

His answering question was prompt and curt.

"Did you think I was an utter lubber, Dorcas?" Then only their steps, crunching the gravel walks, broke the stillness of the hot, dry night.

It was Dorcas who spoke first, spoke out of the tangled mazes of her own thoughts. In real life, as in the inky figure

on her hard-written pages, the situation was the same: she had piped unto Lanier, and he had danced. And yet, within the limits of the book, she would have accepted the accountability she was shunting now, by her next words.

"I should have been told," she said slowly. "It was not fair to leave me in the dark."

Gordon's voice was tender now, in speaking of his absent father.

"Dad always has felt the disgrace of it very keenly," he replied. "He never could bear to have it mentioned."

The silence fell again. Again it was Dorcas who broke it, this time in sudden mutiny at the atmosphere of grave disapproval into which she so unwittingly had walked.

"And you serve things, as a matter of course," she argued.

Gordon nodded slowly. When his answer came, it was in metaphor.

"A man is n't afraid of the enemy he faces, only of the one ready to stab him in the back," he told her gravely.

And Dorcas, listening, admitted the truth of what he said. Attraction or no, previous and nameless bond or no, it was a fact that she had stabbed in the back, insidiously, this man who had met her quite simply as a friend, one so near of kin as to be only too well aware of the vulnerable joint in his moral armour. She listened and admitted. Admitting, although she bowed her head in a superficial shame, brought on her less by her own misdoing than by the weight of Gordon's disapproval, her dominant feeling was yet one of scorn, not for herself who so unwittingly had done the tempting, but for Lanier who had yielded to what her reason assured her was, must have been, the slightest possible of all temptations. And scorn was by no means the emotion she had expected Duncan Lanier to arouse.

Meanwhile, it was waxing late; but, despite the lateness of the hour, a discussion of quite another sort was taking place within the Braithwaite library. All that evening, Rica Braithwaite had been sitting on the verandah with her daughter,

talking over with her the details of the coming-out reception, now so near at hand. At last, however, even Betty had grown sleepy over the hackneyed theme; and, rising, she had followed the younger Braithwaites up to bed. Then Rica had gone to join her husband in the house.

To her surprise, she found him, his paper on the floor, and his cigar unlighted in his inert hand, gazing gloomily into the empty fireplace. Rica's step quickened, as she crossed the floor, and the expression in her eyes, when she dropped down upon a footstool by her husband's side, would have astounded Dorcas Coit, had she been there to see. Nevertheless, —

"What now, Arnold?" she asked him quietly.

Lifting his head, he turned and looked at her with heavy eyes.

"I lunched, to-day, with Gordon Coit," he answered.

Seating herself below him, Rica had flung one hand upward across his knee. Now he could feel her fingers tighten on a fold of the heavy cloth; but her voice was even more quiet than before, as she inquired quite simply, —

"Then he has come?"

"Yes. He came, last night. Coit said they had n't looked for him so soon."

"And he — " Her voice failed her, for an instant. Then she began her phrase anew. "It is all settled, then?"

"Yes."

Letting go the fold, she fell to stroking the cloth gently, very gently.

"Poor old boy!" she said at length. "It's bound to be a worry, Arnold; but, at least, we're standing side by side, ready to take it when it comes."

He shut his lips together, for a minute. Even that, however, could not make his voice entirely steady, as he answered, —

"Rica, that is the worst part of it all."

"But why?" she asked indomitably. "What else does marriage mean, except that we are to share and share alike

in all things? And, because you have kept me in luxury, all these years, Arnold, it does n't follow of necessity that you have spoiled me — quite, me or the children. We've had our good days together and made the very best of them. Now we will take the bad ones, the same way."

Tossing his cigar upon the table, he put his hand across her shoulders, and tightened his arm a very little. Then they sat there, silent.

Rica spoke at last.

"Arnold, would it do any good, if I were to say a word to Leonard Coit?"

His arm dropped instantly, as though a flame had seared him into motion.

"Anything but that, Rica!" he bade her sternly. "Where is your pride?"

"But he is such an old, old friend," she urged. "Surely, if he understood — And I have known him always, and so well; really, Arnold, I am perfectly willing to speak to him about it, to tell him —"

But he interrupted her.

"One asks alms from a stranger, not a friend," he reminded her grimly.

This time, she sat up and faced him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes alight with pride.

"It is n't alms," she told him steadily. "It is your right, your earned right. For years and years and years, you have given your life for this great corporation. You always have been its treasurer; for fully one third of every year, you have been its president in everything but name. Its worries have been your worries, its fights your fights, its dubious days yours. You've given it the best years of your life; and now, when your experience and your judgment are at their very best, they have asked for your resignation, just because," her voice rang harder; "because Gordon Coit has come out of college, and must be provided with an office chair impressive enough to match his father's dignity. Arnold, such

things are a scandal to the very name of business; they are unjust and, what's more, they are simply brutal."

"Perhaps. What then?" And a world of weariness was in the question.

"Then? I'd fight it, Arnold; fight it till I died, fighting."

"What use to fight a corporation?" Then dreadingly he answered his own question. "None."

"But —" She controlled herself and faced him, transfigured by the tenderness of her protecting love. "Arnold," she said quietly; "I would fight a dozen corporations, single-handed, for the sake of getting just consideration for my dear old boy. As it happens, though, this matter lies in the hands of one man. I've heard you say so, yourself, when it was all so remote as to be a matter of theory, not of fact. Is n't Leonard Coit the real power behind the whole great throne?"

She sat there, poised, to receive his answer. When it came, it was well-nigh inaudible.

"Yes, Rica, I believe he is."

"And you call him your friend!" she burst out hotly. "Your friend, who is willing to cut your life in two, — yes, in two. I know what your work has always meant to you, Arnold — in order to give the pieces to his son to play with. Arnold, it is — But let me speak to him," she begged, with a swift change of tone. "Surely, I could make him see, make him realize."

"Rica," Arnold Braithwaite's level voice cut in across her passion, reducing it to white, cold ashes; "this is hard for you, harder even than it is for me; but I am going to make it harder still by asking you one favour: that you promise me you never will mention this matter in any way to Leonard Coit."

When Rica spoke again, her hand was once more stroking her husband in a caress that needed no words of explanation. Her eyes were on the fireplace; he could not see her cheeks and lashes, but her voice was steady, her accent almost cheerful.

"After all, we shall manage all right, Arnold, even if we do have to cut down a little here and there. I thought it would be better to bring out Betty before the storm breaks; really, you've no idea what a splurge I am planning to make out of almost nothing. After that, as soon as we decently can, without attracting too much notice, we'll let one of the maids go, and get rid of the horses, all but the one Betty rides. Poor child, she'll have to have her little fling; but mercifully the others are so much younger, we won't have to plan about any of them but Billy yet. What a blessing that the others are all boys!"

But Braithwaite broke in upon her flow of apparently careless words.

"Leaving Betty out, Rica," he said gravely; "what is this going to do to you?"

The question set the tears to sliding down her cheeks once more; but she kept her face turned to the andirons, and her voice, when at last she spoke, had all its customary resonance.

"Don't worry about me, Arnold. I'm the least of my own troubles. Besides, I have n't the slightest wish to get fat and heavy before my time." She rose to her feet and stood behind his chair, her hand upon his graying head. "Don't worry, dear old boy," she said again. "As long as we have each other to hang on to, it's bound to be all right." Then, for at last her voice had failed her, though not her courage, she stooped and kissed him, and was gone.

Two long hours later, when Arnold Braithwaite roused himself and went upstairs to bed, he found his wife, to all appearing, wrapped in dreamless and contented sleep. Not all the skill in the world, however, could conceal from Arnold Braithwaite the marks of tears upon her face.

No tears were visible on Rica Braithwaite's face, though, upon the afternoon she had ordained for Betty's introduction to the world. Betty herself amid her orchids looked scarcely younger and more gay; not even Betty, weighted down as she was with the sense of her own importance, could

rival her mother's carefree, happy manner. Around her was a smother of flowers; above her rose the buzz of many voices, backed by the mellow stridence of an orchestra; before her passed a long, long line of men and women, all in their best array. On her right hand and her left stood two women, Betty, and Dorcas Coit, both of them in white, the one of the debutante and the other of the bride: Betty and Dorcas Coit, the girl whose fate was hanging in the balance; the woman, though so very little older, the woman whose fate was fixed. Or was it?

Meanwhile, Rica had fulfilled her promise of a splurge. Of the elements which had gone into its making, she took no heed, to-day. Her masseuse might have told some tales; but she was reticent as well as skilful, and it was with an unruffled brow that Rica Braithwaite listened to the congratulations of her guests.

Just once, her indolent poise seemed broken. That was when she saw Gordon Coit's head rising above all the others in the line, as it approached her. Her eyes glittered, and the pink stole up across her cheeks; but she greeted him with her same sunny smile which had faced all the other guests.

"Gordon, you young giant! Why have n't you been in here yet to play with Betty?" she demanded, as she took his hand. Then, as she saw the colour darken in his face, she added slowly, "Besides, your coming back here means a good deal more to us Braithwaites than you probably are aware."

It was the one outcry her wounded womanhood dared make. No one heard it, however, except Gordon himself; but Gordon, as he passed on to make his bow to Betty, was uncomfortably aware of the especial meaning which lay behind the smiling, cordial words.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DUNCAN LANIER left The Terraces, the morning after Gordon's talk with Dorcas. He had only run up for the night, he explained. Gordon had been too insistent to be put off; he had dropped his other engagements, for the sake of sharing in the welcome home of the boy of whom really he was very fond. Already he had overstayed his time, and must be rushing back. If possible, he would see them all after the Braithwaite reception; he had promised Rica to be on hand for that, if he could get away. Of what he was to get away from, he vouchsafed no explanation, and Dorcas did not ask. She merely phrased a perfunctory regret or two, and offered him the tips of her cold fingers. Meet his eyes she dared not, lest he read the scorn within her own. Had she looked into his face, however, she would have read there a passion of regret, a dumb plea for pity which would have increased the dull thudding of her heart where the curious, nameless attraction of the man before her was struggling back to life from beneath the weight of scorn.

And Duncan Lanier went his way, realizing her aversion, realizing its cause, and admitting to the full the justice of it. Life had left few illusions in the mind of Duncan Lanier. His forty years of struggle had not blinded him either to the disgustfulness of his besetting sin, or to the calibre of the man he might have been without it. He had struggled, too. Gordon was right about that. Nature, however, had been in cruel mood at Lanier's birth. She had endowed him with a strong taint of inherited appetite, a legacy from some remote and toddy-loving ancestor which, skipping over divers gen-

erations of iron-grained men, had come to rest upon Lanier, fine of fibre, brilliant of brain and strong of conscience, yet uncompromisingly weak in nerve resistance, weaker still in the mere power of gastric assimilation which had enabled his ancestor placidly to absorb enough of alcohol to drive his finer-grained descendant through all the horrors of delirium tremens at its worst. Not that Lanier ever did have delirium tremens, however. His conscience and his innate sense of decency always had brought him up with a round turn, far short of that. Instead, he was merely garrulous and silly. In the long run, it might have been better for his social chances, had he gone to the extremest limits of delirium. That, at least, calls forth a rebuking sense of pity, while silliness arouses nothing but disgusted scorn.

Without his blighting weakness, Lanier would have been a brilliant man. His brains were better than those of the average human being; moreover, they were infinitely better trained. A man, by his infirmity cast out from any active career, professional or business, has little else to do but cultivate his intellect. The best part of Lanier's life, the best because the most productive, the most steady, had been passed among the European universities, learning to know the inside at once of books and men. Always, however, it had been men, not women. Lanier's life was still young when he had learned to recognize the scorn in woman's eyes. One lesson was enough. From that time onward, he fulfilled the obvious duties of his social life, dined, danced, chatted and even called; but he took no woman as his friend, no woman, that is, but Rica Braithwaite. Strange to say, out of all the men who had made up her social set, Duncan Lanier was the only one who had delved beneath the enamelled surface of Rica's face and manner, who had come in contact with the throbbing womanhood beneath.

Men, as a rule, liked Lanier. In fact, there lay one of the sources of his greatest danger, a danger he realized but too keenly. In the first of his adult manhood, Lanier had faced

life steadily, his own life as it contrasted with the others of his mates. He had sought to arrange it on well-developed lines. He had admitted his weakness, his worse than mortal danger, worse, because the mortal danger kills, while his danger left him to live on endlessly, and scorned. He had resolved to guard himself at every point that was reasonable; but he also had resolved that, because of his own weakness, he would lay no bonds upon his stronger friends. They should not change their ways of life out of pitying regard for him. Indeed, his manhood writhed at the thought. Instead, he would go with them as far as he could, then step aside and watch them. If he yielded and went a step too far, the fault was his, not theirs. Upon that basis only, could he, self-respecting, mingle with his fellow men.

Of course, he often did overstep the limits experience had taught him to regard as final; of course, again and yet again he went too far. Nevertheless, he refused to give up the strife. The plucky fashion in which, downed, he picked himself up and, smiling sturdily, came to time for the next round, not only had helped to preserve his own self-respect, but had won that of his fellow men. Leonard Coit was the sole exception.

The man who is never tempted, becomes implacable as a judge. Coit never could forgive the lapses of such a man as Duncan Lanier, for the simple reason that lapses like that were disgusting to him, disgusting and wholly unaccountable. To Leonard Coit, it was as socially unthinkable that any decent man could drink too much as it was that he should be a prohibitionist. It never occurred to him to measure out the limits of any possible *too much*, to compare it with the daily allowance which he took so soberly. Moreover, intolerant on principle, Coit felt an added personal pique at Lanier's fits of alcoholic silliness. The man was, in a sense, his kin, brother of Coit's dead wife, uncle of Coit's only son. And theories either crystallize or vanish utterly, when the fact in question concerns one's family circle. Alone

of all the men of his acquaintance, Coit was deaf to the occasional winning cadences of Lanier's voice, blind to his personal charm, uncomprehending before his wisdom and his wit. To Leonard Coit, Duncan Lanier was infinitely less than nothing, a mere cipher which lacked its bounding line.

As the years passed on, and Duncan Lanier came into maturity, he might have had the friendship of many women, might have had something even more. The charm of his personality would have given it to him, even apart from his ancestry and wealth. But, though women smiled towards him and preened their feathers, Duncan Lanier went his disregarding way. The one lesson of his adolescence had been quite enough for him; he would run no risk of having it repeated. Rica Braithwaite was his only woman friend; was, that is, until little Betty, his child comrade, had grown up to leave her childhood far behind. And now, Lanier confessed to himself with a faint consciousness of surprise, now there was Dorcas Coit.

His two chance glimpses of Dorcas in New York had faded entirely from his mind; though, in the time of it, he had accorded to her more attention than he usually gave to faces encountered in the street. This was in part due to her having been with Pater, whom Lanier rightly considered the most loyal one of all his boyhood's friends. In part, it came from a curious, teasing resemblance which he could not trace, resemblance to Dorcas's own picture, begged from Nina Oliver, and for months kept standing in Coit's library, there to be seen of all men and explained to none. Down in New York, Lanier had stared at Dorcas a thought too steadily for perfect manners. Nevertheless, it was not strange that he had failed to recognize the tired little damsel with the shabby gown, or even the crudely girlish portrait, in the haughty woman in the rare old lace, who had welcomed him on the night of his arrival at The Terraces.

The next morning, in their talk together, the attraction of Dorcas Coit had swept over him completely. At the first,

it had been a perfunctory talk on his side, the sort of thing he brought out, by way of paying his debt to a temporary hostess. By degrees, however, it ceased to be perfunctory, and became more personal, more intimate. He talked, and Dorcas answered. Then he went to work to draw out Dorcas; and Dorcas, like most other women in his winning presence, fell to talking well, and wittily enough to down the depressing effect of her own wisdom. Their subjects, under Lanier's skilful guidance, had remained for the most part impersonal. Their treatment of them, however, had been wholly personal, and Duncan Lanier had risen, at the end of an hour, convinced that Dorcas Coit was as downright and practical as she was quick of perception; that, underneath all her imperiousness, all her young equivalent for innate hauteur, she would be tender, compassionate and, moreover, endowed with an extra sense, culled from some unknown, mysterious source, a sense which would make her both pitiful and very helpful to just such an one as he.

Slowly and by infinitesimal degrees, Lanier resolved, he would put this belief to the test. It must be done cautiously, else he would rouse scorn ahead of pity, and then good bye to any chance for help from her. And Lanier, as the years went on, was coming to long for help acutely. His young ambition, stated to all men with intrepid frankness, had been to fight his fate and master it, alone. His riper years were teaching him the utter desolation of his chosen course. Bit by bit, he was coming to crave the pity which, aforetime, he would have scorned. And Dorcas, knowing nothing of his earlier attitude, comprehending and very pitiful, might in time speak out the real compassion that she felt. Only in time, however; not now.

And then had come the mischance of the afternoon, wrecking their possible friendship, and casting up the wreckage into the sight of all men, a thing only fit for scorn. He had spent the evening in his room, not so much thinking things as feeling them. From his window, he had seen Dorcas and

Gordon straying up and down across the terraces. Not a word had risen to him, as he sat there; but, in the white light of the stars, he could make out their attitudes which told him, plainly as words, that they were talking earnestly and with some degree of antagonism. Knowing Gordon's feeling to him, not doubting his knowledge of that of Dorcas, Lanier was sure that he was the subject of their discussion. He sat beside the open window until the night was nearly spent. Next morning, smiling and banal, he announced his early departure for New York.

He neither saw Dorcas, nor heard any mention of her name, until the Braithwaite reception. He thought about her constantly, however; and, the more he thought about her, the more he wished he could see himself in his entirety, viewed in her downright, but compassionate, eyes. What he did see, when at last he met her, was a slim, haughty little figure dressed in a marvellous frock of shimmering white, with diamonds at her throat and in her hair. Beside the smiling impassiveness of Rica Braithwaite at her elbow, Dorcas seemed a vivid tongue of flame. What Lanier could never know, was that the flame had brightened at his slow approach; that Dorcas Coit, giving a smiling word to every guest in the long line before her, had yet been instantly aware of the first moment when his tall figure came across the threshold; that, moreover, much to her own regret, directly she saw him standing there, alert and straight and totally conventional in each least detail, Dorcas felt her carefully nursed scorn subsiding before the approaching pleasure of his greeting. After all, he was a gentleman, and virile; and he had known self-shame, even to the point of the self-inflicted punishment of his swift departure. Moreover yet again, and now the little smile that curved her lips was not wholly for the passing guests, moreover still, he was not entirely real, but rather a character strayed from her poor little, ruined novel, the one bit of vitality remaining out of the sodden wreckage of her hopes. And he was attractive,

even as she had done her best to make him. The last intervening guest departed, she stretched out to him a cordial hand.

Their meeting was not thrilling; at least, not outwardly, although each one of them, questioned, might truly have confessed to a little thrill.

"Betty has been wondering if you would get here," she told him.

And, —

"Yes; but we ran into a caboose, down here at Stamford, and I nearly missed it," he told her back again. And then he added, plainly as an afterthought, "Is Coit quite well?"

The next moment, Rica had pounced upon him and dragged him forward to look at Betty in her white tulle and orchids.

LANIER did not follow the example of so many of the other guests, and go back to New York, that same night. Instead, and apparently quite by chance, Dorcas met him, early the next morning and quite far down town. The few weeks that she had spent as mistress of The Terraces had made Dorcas an important factor in the day's routine of the entire establishment; and one of her first acts had been the taking to herself the place of the man who had been used to drive Coit down to his business. Her childhood's summers, spent upon a Berkshire farm, had taught her to know horses; her quick eye and steady hand and active brain all came to her assistance, when Coit's chauffeur gave her lessons in running the little car, and then the great one. Accordingly, morning after morning, she went driving down the hill, directly after breakfast, while Coit beside her smoked contentedly and watched her slim gloved fingers as they grasped the leather reins or the brass levers of the motor, smiling, the while, at her gay chatter.

To Coit's mind, his wife was a child, a pretty toy, almost a valued chattel. Without her, he was frankly bored. With her, he petted her, spoiled her, indulged her every whim;

but never once did he admit her to the inner places of his business life and cares. He was not secretive in the least; it merely never had occurred to him that she would be interested, still less that her clear-headed advice could be helpful or inspiring. And Dorcas, watching the office door swing to behind him, made no murmur, albeit now and then a wistful look came into her brown eyes. Coit to her was everything that his manhood had promised, but not that her womanhood had dreamed. Her wedded life was teaching Dorcas Coit the subtle difference between happiness and content. Apparently she filled his needs completely; loving him loyally, she yet was conscious that her own life still showed occasional empty spaces.

On this particular morning, an empty space had become insistent. Gordon and Coit, at breakfast, had exchanged a word or two regarding a possible change in the company's directorate, and Dorcas had cut in with a downright question. Coit had answered the question courteously, but very briefly. Then he had led the talk away to purely social matters, and had kept it there throughout the remainder of the breakfast, and then throughout the drive. Dorcas had yielded to his manifest wish, had discussed her day's engagements and even the vagaries of her tailor at great length. Nevertheless, the wistful look lay heavy in her eyes, as she reversed the motor and turned the car about, to start towards home. It still was there when, at a crowded crossing of the city streets, she glanced up to see who it was had called her name.

Her glance fell directly on Lanier, halting close beside the car. His hat was in his hand, allowing the brilliant October sun to fall across his vivid hair and strike full into his eager face where pleasure seemed struggling with something oddly akin to diffidence. If Dorcas had bethought herself of the little cloud between them, common mercy would have caused her to dispel that diffidence at once. However, the memory was driven from her mind by the mere pleasure of their

meeting. Only an instant earlier, her thoughts had been lingering affectionately on Pater, dear old Pater who told her things and asked her advice, and whom she acutely longed to see once more. Then, the next instant, Lanier had appeared to her as a human, living link with Pater, and her whole face lighted, as she held out her hand.

"It is a good morning; is n't it?" she made blithe answer to his greeting. "I never thought I could meet you out so early, though. When do we see you at The Terraces?"

His face betrayed irresolution. Then the lines of his lips stiffened suddenly.

"Now. That is, if you're going up there."

For her only answer, she drew her skirt aside. Lanier stepped in and, the crossing cleared, the car slid slowly forward, quickening its pace as it advanced.

"I hope I have n't changed your plans," Lanier said a bit dubiously, when at last the car was rushing smoothly forward.

Dorcas waited until she had run around a wagon and a brace of street cars. Then she laughed and shook her head. The ozone of the morning appeared to have entered into her, during those last few minutes; and yet she herself, asked, would have been wholly at a loss to explain the change.

"I don't have any plans, nowadays," she assured him gayly; "I'm just a part of the domestic scheme. Really, it's rather restful, after wearing yourself out in planning things that never by any chance came off."

Turning, he smiled at her accent, smiled into her face, alert and girlish, beneath the shading feathers of her wide brown hat. Life was curiously benign to Dorcas Coit, he told himself, had always been benign. Else, she would never have looked so —

"And the scheme?" he asked her vaguely, aware that she had paused to await reply. "Who plans that?"

"Leonard, I suppose. He has a genius for making plans, and I—" the car slipped through a cranny so narrow that

Lanier, watching, held his breath in fear; "I think I must have an equal genius for carrying them out. Witness this morning drive of ours. Leonard likes to be driven to the office. I never touched a car, hardly ever rode in one, till I came here; but I knew I was better company than any mere chauffeur. Was n't the Braithwaite party pretty?"

Lanier nodded, too dazed by the suddenness of her transition to give a more conventional response. After a minute, —

"Rica always is an ideal hostess," he said.

"Ye-es." Then, for no especial reason, the car slowed down. "I wish I understood her better," Dorcas added.

"It takes a little time. However —" Then, with a suddenness that matched her own, Lanier went on. "Dorcas, I dreaded the meeting you, yesterday," he said simply.

"Why?" she asked him as casually as she was able, although the swift colour, rising in her cheeks, showed him that she had grasped at his unspoken meaning.

Lanier's answer was direct; in fact, uncompromisingly so.

"Because, the last time I saw you, I had made a fool of myself," he replied a little brusquely.

Her colour grew a shade deeper, even. It was by no means plain to her what answer she best would make. Deny the fact she could not. Still less could she betray to him that other fact: that she had discussed the affair with Gordon.

Lanier himself came to her relief, however.

"Gordon told me that you and he had talked about it," he said, with an apparent unconcern so steady that, perforce, she steadied to meet it. "It's just as well he told you. In fact, you ought to have been told before; that is, if any one had thought to mention me at all. But what I want to say is this, Dorcas: it was my fault; I hope you won't feel too responsible for any harm that may have come out of that afternoon."

Her cheeks flaming now, but her eyes grown gentle, she faced him, with a hurried, nervous wish to reassure him as speedily and as truthfully as possible.

"Really, there was n't any especial harm," she said a little incoherently. "The maid had gone inside the house; nobody was there but Leonard and Gordon and me, and I understood."

"You?" Astonishment drove the appeal from his brown eyes.

"Yes, I — I knew what must have happened. Of course, though, I never dreamed that you could —" She halted suddenly.

Bitterness crept into his low voice, as he made answer, —

"No; of course, you could not have been expected ever to dream that any man you met could make such a spectacle of himself."

His accent hurt her, and she turned on him with swift generosity.

"I should have known, Mr. Lanier."

"How?" The curt question cut her phrase in two.

"At least, I should not have taken any chances with a total stranger," she persisted, although, up to that very moment, she would have repeated just that same chance with just the same degree of carelessness. Now, even after the words were spoken, she was conscious of a subconscious wonder as to what power had brought them out of her, had given them that accent which usually one reserves for a well-thumbed truth. By way of flinging their gravity aside, she added lightly, "And, as it was, no real harm was done. It was very slight, and there were only our three selves to see it, anyway. We don't tell tales."

A tired little smile crept over Lanier's face.

"Dorcas," he told her gently; "it's too late now for tales to do harm, or good. It's not a large city; our set is rather well known, and I've spent a good share of my life here. On that account — and a few others — nine people out of every ten could tell you that I am forty-two years old; and that, for the last twenty years and perhaps a little more, my record has been dotted with just such scenes as that one was,

the other day; sometimes, even, a good deal worse. But — ”

In the pause, the car sprang forward.

“But?” Dorcas asked, so sharply as to conceal her real emotion, just as the long brown feathers dangling from her hat concealed her face from the intent and slightly appealing eyes beside her.

Instantly the light in the brown and intent eyes was extinguished, and the note of passion left the quiet voice. When Lanier spoke, his accent was conventionally inert and smooth.

“But this is altogether too fine a morning to be wasted on such details as that. Besides,” his laugh was slightly sardonic; “I believe the first lesson in social manners concerns the vulgar futility of all apologies. One does say things, or one does not; but the least said about it all, the better. Therefore,” his bow was formal, stilted; “therefore I am denied the solace of an apology for boring you so long, to-day.”

When next he spoke, it was to open up a prolix discussion of the relative merits of transatlantic liners, a discussion that lasted throughout the remainder of the drive and throughout the limits of his later call. Nevertheless, when he arose to go, Dorcas put out her hand and spoke with a slow, downright insistence.

“Mr. Lanier,” she told him gravely; “some day, if all goes well, I think we may understand each other better. We have been marking time, to-day; but I’m not sure that it has been quite my fault. You’ll come again, though?” And her wavering smile, born of her brave attempt to help him keep the talk impersonal, was not for Pater’s old-time friend, nor yet for the figure strayed from out her pages; but rather for a fellow man waging, as she too had done, a sorry fight against the powers of hostile fortune. No hours of patient explanation or apology on his part could have brought that futile struggle home to her so vividly as did his patient way of casting it all behind him, once her sympathetic interest had seemed to slacken.

Moreover, the slackening had been only in seeming, only the result of the increasing strain which she had placed upon herself, rather than allow the man beside her to gain an inkling of her comprehending pity. Dorcas Coit had kept her own confidence intact; but what had she done with that which Duncan Lanier had been upon the point of offering to her?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THIS time, Duncan Lanier appeared to be in no haste about returning to New York. Instead, he took up his temporary abode at a down-town club, and spent the next few weeks in loitering about his own home city, lunching with his man friends, driving now and then of a morning with Betty Braithwaite, dropping in for tea with Rica or, more rarely, with Dorcas Coit.

During these idle weeks of autumn, Dorcas saw him often. As yet the winter treadmill of society had not begun its whirring. People still had a little time to give their friends. With Dorcas, where all the friends were in the experimental stage, it was possible to manifest some degree of choice. She was allowing herself to drift into a species of quasi-intimacy with Rica Braithwaite, not so much from attraction, as because the older woman piqued her curiosity, and because the earlier association of their husbands seemed to presuppose a like relation between the two wives.

Arnold Braithwaite's resignation was now an active fact. He sat at home, smoking and reading his paper, or potted, shears in hand, about his grounds, or lounged into one of his clubs in season for a mid-afternoon game of chess. He had aged perceptibly in those autumn weeks; his hair had grayed yet more, his flesh looked flabby and there were loosish bags of skin beneath the eyes. Rica, on the other hand, claimed that she was growing fat. Accordingly, she sent away her own maid and one housemaid, in order to give herself more incentive to exercise. The same excuse applied to the giving up the horses; but when Rica appeared down town, one

morning, wearing her last-year's hat quite palpably made over, a few discerning critics found flaws in the excuse. Dorcas was among the critics. Watching Rica Braithwaite for a month, she might have accepted the fable of the maids and the horses; but the hat told its own literal story. Dorcas knew. She had been through it all, herself. From that morning onward, something beside mere placid curiosity entered into her growing interest in Rica Braithwaite.

At the Braithwaites', she met Lanier often. Between the meetings, her mind was increasingly busy with him. Coit, in those autumn days, was filling up her heart completely, but not her mind. She loved Coit with a deepening affection, as loyal as it was serene. Her gratitude alone would have accounted for that. Day after day, confronted with some new proof of his heedful forethought for her happiness, she shuddered at the recollection of what, without him, her present life would have become. He had sought her, his hands full to the overflowing; lavishly and ungrudgingly he had cast their contents at her feet. In return, she was giving him her girlish love, loyal, pure, serene, the only love of which she judged herself capable. Later was to come her disillusion. In time, she would learn that she was offering him watered milk in place of blood and fire. Meanwhile, although her heart seemed to her full, her brain was growing restive. Now and then it appeared to her that Coit's great love wrapped her round too closely, that his protection was so masterful that it left no scope for the workings of her own individuality. In these moments, her individuality stirred in its present tranquil sleep, lifted its naked head and looked about in search of outlet for its action. One path before it had been closed by the final failure of her literary aspirations. In casting about her for another, there flashed into her mind the words of Dickie and the like words of dear old Pater: that the time would inevitably come when, tossing aside the problems of her own soul, she would fall to work upon that of her neighbour.

When Dickie's phrase, *the next man's oversoul*, first came back to her, she was dressing for a dinner when Lanier was to be their solitary guest. Dorcas had sent away her maid, and was adding the final touches to her own toilette when some subtle association of ideas led her to address Buddha, seated aloft above her elaborate dressing-table.

"I've done everything I could think of to prevent a crisis, Buddha," she told the placid effigy, in a sudden, causeless wave of self-defence. "I've even instructed Wier not to open anything more riotous than ginger pop. Poor creature! It would be pitiful, if only it were n't so paltry. A grown-up man to get drunk on iced tea plus!" She paused, frowning up at Buddha, until the scornful smile had faded from around her lips. Suddenly she gave a little shiver, and glanced apprehensively at the closed door behind her. "Buddha!" she spoke lower, more swiftly. "Is that the reason I can't quite despise him utterly? Does my — my having run the risk of that awful, awful tonic make me know more about it than I am supposed to do, know just how easy it is to get the taste into you, the taste and the wonderful exhilaration that comes after? Oh, Buddha!" The voice fell to a mere murmur. "Even now, there are days when I long for the old, wild shiver that comes with the feeling one's self so gloriously alive. And do you suppose he —" Turning, she walked across and across the floor, her long silken train hissing softly after her as she moved. Then, her hands clasped hard behind her, she lifted her face again to Buddha. "Buddha," she said slowly; "it is that. I know it now. He does interest me, does attract me, in a sense. I seem always to be sure of what he is going to say or do. I had supposed it was because he was a link with the dear old, hungry days, and Pater; because he stood to me for the living hero I had tried to make out of ink and a paper pad. I know now that it all comes out of my own certainty just how easy it is to be so pitifully, despicably weak; how hard —"

"Dorcas?" Coit's voice followed his knock. "Send your maid away, dear, and talk to me, instead. I'm deady tired, with too much office, and — Thank you." He glanced about him, as Dorcas threw open the door. "I thought I heard you talking to somebody," he said, a trifle blankly.

Dorcas's smile was a bit inscrutable, while she made answer, —

"Only to Buddha, Leonard. My old trick, so don't be jealous. Now sit down, dear boy, while I put on the final touches. You like the frock?"

The flimsy little chair creaked beneath Coit's weight, as he leaned back and surveyed her with eyes too full of love to hold any criticism.

"I like the girl inside the frock a good deal better," he said, with measured, slow content. "Dorcas, try to think back to what The Terraces was, just a year ago."

"I'd rather not," she assured him merrily. "The contrast between it and my boarding-house would be too great. I wonder if it's possible to have a retroactive envy."

Coit laughed, while, rising to follow her from the room, he laid a caressing hand upon the topaz chain about her throat.

"As much as any emotion can work backward, I fancy," he said tenderly. "It seems to me now that I have loved you, all my life."

With a swift gesture, Dorcas drew away from his caressing touch.

"Leonard," she rebuked him gravely; "if I were dying, it would kill me all the faster, kill all my hopes of immortality, to feel it would be possible for you ever to say that to any other woman, after I was dead."

For an instant, at her sudden outburst of such passion as he had never known her show, he stared back at her with astonished eyes. Then, —

"Come!" he told her gently. "It is time we were downstairs."

However, though he put her off without direct reply,

there was born in Leonard Coit, that instant, the germ of a new thought, of a doubt quite new. Was Dorcas, after all, the mere facile, loving child she looked and seemed?

Dorcas, meanwhile, her nerves still throbbing from the excitement of this, her first self-assertion in the presence of her husband, her brain still fired with the memory of her one-sided talk with Buddha, of the year-old fact which it had recalled, and of the new belief which it had evoked, Dorcas felt her pulses tingle, as she gave her hand to Lanier in greeting. Was his the next man's soul of Dickie's admonition? Was her complete, though unacknowledged, comprehension, to be a factor in his later betterment? In fact, was it all ordained to this one end, all her past of striving, and of frustrate work, and of that nameless horror of temptation which she had stunned, but never wholly killed? Were such temptations, such alluring knowledges, ever killed completely, ever entirely wiped off from the fabric of one's brain? And that halting, reluctant half-confidence from Lanier, which she inadvertently had checked: whither would it have led? What depths of confession would it have brought to light — on his side and on hers? On hers? She gave the suggestion an unqualified assent. She knew it now; although, before, often as in her own mind she had sought to complete the confidence, the thought of her own answering share in it never once had occurred to her. All this was warring in her mind, as she gave her hand to Lanier who stood before her, smiling down at her in friendly fashion, while his red-brown eyes searched her face silently, questioning the wavering emotions written there.

Midway in the serving of the dinner, Coit beckoned to the butler, and gave him an order which, albeit almost inaudible, caused Dorcas to look up, the hot colour mounting in her cheeks. Bending low, the butler made equally inaudible reply.

"Eh? What?" Coit's face betrayed his uncomprehending astonishment.

The butler bent again, spoke again. This time, four final words were audible.

"— Mrs. Coit's orders, sir."

For the first time in all her life, Dorcas saw Leonard Coit look really angry. The look frightened her; she dropped her eyes to her plate, and her fork rattled against the lustrous china. There was an instant's pause. Then Coit spoke quietly.

"No matter, Wier. It's quite all right," he said.

But Dorcas, listening, knew that it was not right, by any means.

Later, after Lanier had said his good-nights and gone away, Coit came and stood before Dorcas on the rug. He was smiling a little, but his face was stern.

"Dorcas," he said to her directly; "I think you made a mistake, to-night."

"I am very sorry," she assured him, in quiet apology; but whether her sorrow referred to her own mistake or to his estimate of it, she saw no need to say.

"You know," he added, in belated explanation; "we have always made a point of not yielding to Lanier's weakness in this thing."

"We?" Her arching brows moved upward. For the moment, she was conscious of a passing irritation, even against her husband, for the autocratic way in which he seemed to appropriate the plural pronoun for himself. It sounded royal, even a little bit tyrannical.

To her surprise, the slow red mounted in his cheeks.

"Madeleine and I," he explained, with a manifest effort.

Dorcas's unreasoning irritation increased with the effort. There seemed to her a certain cruelty in this relegating of her predecessor to the limbo of forgotten and unmentionable things. Nevertheless, she passed that subject by in silence. It was something too sacred for her young and clumsy touch. Instead, —

"Why?" she asked him, with a flat calm born of her attempt to down her irritation.

The single word fell on him like a blow, stinging him to hasty speech.

"Because we saw no need to change our lives, just on account of his weaknesses."

"But, if it helped him —" Dorcas began; but Coit cut her beginning short.

"For that sort of thing, Lanier must help himself," he said sternly, and his sternness was that of the man who feels no charm in sin, no comprehension that sin can be made ever to appear alluring. Then, with a sudden change of tone, Coit spoke again. "Dear child," he was beginning, while he drew a chair forward and placed himself beside her.

But Dorcas interrupted him, speaking with restive impatience.

"Don't call me that, Leonard!" she bade him hastily.

He looked across at her in surprise.

"Why not, dear?" he asked.

"I'm not a child, Leonard. I am a full-grown woman, not in years, perhaps, but in —" her voice caught; "life. I wish you would n't always treat me as a child."

His doubts, born earlier in the evening, came back to him once more.

"But you seem a child to an old boy like me, Dorcas," he urged her, half in appeal, half in play. "I was settling down into a dull middle age, when you came to rescue me, a dear, loyal little girl who let me take her for my very, very own." Like many a strong man, he felt his voice quiver with his own emotion.

Her elbows on her knees and her eyes upon the fire, Dorcas spoke slowly.

"Let you take me for your companion, Leonard; not your toy."

Once more he stared at her uncomprehendingly, a new doubt struggling with the love in his steady eyes.

"Dorcas," his voice grew harsh; "is it that you're not happy, satisfied?"

Dropping her hands from beneath her chin, she clinched them together on her silken skirt.

"Leonard, you do make me very happy. You can make me — satisfied."

More even than his pause, the drop in his voice showed how her words had hurt him.

"Not now?" he asked her; and he whitened, as he waited for her answer.

Above the silken skirt, the hands clinched each other tighter. Dorcas's eyes were on his face now, a face whose every thought she was learning to read. None the less, all unexpectedly the time was come for her to say this thing.

"Not yet, Leonard. Not while you treat me as a child."

"But you are one; that is, as compared to me." Plainly he was casting about in his own mind in search of self-justification. "Besides," he added helplessly; "long ago, before you left Northampton, you spoke of us as being chums."

She smiled, as there flashed back into her mind the hasty consternation which had followed her use of the trivial word. Then her smile faded.

"Leonard," she said; and, as she spoke, some impulse drove her to her feet and left her standing close before him, still and slim and straight, clothed in the burnished silken folds that fell in long, soft lines from throat to hem; "Leonard, that was only in the little things of life. We women — yes, women. Whatever the years have left undone, my life has made me all a woman — we women do not care much for those, once we know that the greater ones exist. I am your chum, Leonard; but, more than that, I am your wife. What you used to give me carelessly, in little things, you owe me now, as my right, and in the greater ones."

"And that?" he questioned briefly, too busy with the tumult of self-distrustings she had evoked, to pause for many words.

"Confidence, and understanding; both absolute," she told him, with terse bravery. And then she let the silence fall over her short words.

For a time, she stood there motionless, gazing down at his grave face, turned fireward and seemingly unconscious of her steady eyes. She tried in vain to read its meaning. There was no antagonism written there, no anger, only a dull disappointment, and another look, quite untranslatable to her, but born of the hitherto unknown experience of self-question, self-distrust. Up to now, it never had occurred to Leonard Coit that the path on which he had chosen to walk steadily along towards full perfection, could be the easiest, but not of necessity the most direct. It had been enough for him that he kept well inside the path, and recognized the sanctity of the goal. And now, on such a trifling issue as all this, the first doubts had poked up their heads, directly in his pathway. The issue was so paltry, too. He had called his wife *dear child*, and hinted, as was palpable, that she could have no proper notion of the way to meet Lanier's limitations. Under his snow-white hair, Coit's brow showed the unwonted furrows.

And Dorcas, realizing the unwonted self-distrust, seeing the furrows, relented speedily. Dropping down into her chair once more, she rested one hand on the arm of her husband's chair.

"Leonard, I was cross," she said contritely. "I'm sorry. I spoke out, before I realized. It's only that we women are jealous things, jealous above all of our own importance. You spoil me in every possible way; but now and then I want to be sure I am necessary to you, not as an ornament, but as a part of your man's life and its cares and its interests. Else," her brown eyes met his eyes directly; "else, I shall feel I have fallen short of what you had in mind, when you asked me to be your wife. The name can hold so much in it, and, Leonard —"

"My reverend parents!" Gordon's jovial voice cut in

across Dorcas's low murmur. "Are you aware it is all hours of the night, and here you sit, hand in hand, and spooning?" And he came striding forward, to rest his elbows on the mantel just before them.

Dorcas tossed aside her earnestness.

"Who's a better right?" she asked him merrily.

Gordon shook his head.

"How should I know? Dad came in ahead of me, and left me a lonely, envious old bachelor. I only hope he realizes all the ruin he has made of my life. I say, what's the theme of conversation?"

Dorcas waited for her husband to make reply. Then, after a minute, she resolved to come back to close quarters upon the original point of difference.

"Mr. Lanier," she answered Gordon.

"Uncle Duncan? What now?" Gordon looked anxious. "I thought he was steady as a turnip, to-night."

"So he was. Your father was a little dubious over my having taken care that he should keep so."

Coit roused himself. Under the weight of his self-doubts, he spoke a little ponderously.

"Not that, Dorcas; at least, not exactly. I only wondered whether, after all, it might not seem to put a premium on his wrong doing, if we upset ourselves to forestall it."

"But it ought to be forestalled in some way," she urged him, with a sudden renewal of her former heat.

"He must forestall it for himself," Coit offered slow correction.

"How can he, when we put temptation in his way?" she urged again.

"Dorcas, my dear," low and quiet, Coit's voice broke in upon her tempestuous words; "listen and think it over just a bit. Because you had a blind man in the house, you would n't feel you had to give up books; if I went lame, you and Gordon would not give up your dancing. Because Duncan Lanier can't take his wine like any other decent

man, there's no especial reason that we should cut ourselves off from anything more stimulating than root beer."

"It's not a parallel, dad," Gordon cut in, with a lazy good-nature which well-nigh veiled his real interest in the question. "If our dancing prevailed on you to get up on a pair of broken legs and do a jig, you bet we'd call off the orchestra."

Dorcas smiled up at him in swift approval. As a matter of pure theory only, she preferred to fight her own battles.

"Besides," she added; "it's not a case with him of passively accepting an inevitable handicap. He's constantly struggling to get rid of it, and start even in the race."

"He is."

"Is he?"

Simultaneously the son and father spoke. As usually happens, the doubt outweighed the mere assertion. It was the doubt that Dorcas answered; answering, her tone was slightly dry.

"On the showing of all his friends," she said.

"Perhaps." Coit let himself settle back into the depths of his chair, but his face still showed its uneasy sternness. "But, if it's true, why does it show so little in its practical outcome?"

"Leonard!" Dorcas sat up sharply. "Are n't you a little harsh in judging him?"

He shook his head.

"Just, not harsh, Dorcas," he corrected her. "He has brought it fairly on himself."

Her brown eyes flashed ominously, the red rushed to her cheeks and her chin lifted with its old, imperious motion, while she sat gazing at him hostilely. Gordon, watching, interposed, for, young as he was, he yet was well aware of the lasting scar hot words can leave behind.

"After all, dad, perhaps we don't know all the causes," he suggested. "Uncle Duncan has the worst of it, in any case. Why not show him all the mercy we can scrape to-

gether? We three are really all the relatives the poor beggar owns, and I should say, if only on account of that, it was rather up to us."

Coit's face, however, did not light. Rather, it darkened at the memory, called up by Gordon's careless words, of all the shame thrust into his own shameless, blameless life by reason of his adopted kinship with a man like Duncan Lanier.

"Are you sure, Gordon," he asked gravely; "that such a case as this gains from too much mercy?"

"It's bound to," Dorcas broke in abruptly.

"Not if we take the — the disgrace as a thing to be wrapped up in cotton wool."

Dorcas's mind flew away to Dickie, to his untrammelled condemnation of the morphine-loving musician he had once accompanied, to the unconscious effect of that condemnation on herself. She spoke hastily.

"But think!" she urged Coit. "What if it were yourself?"

He shook his head.

"Dorcas, I am afraid that I can't grasp such a possibility," he told her, and his voice was just a little cold.

But memories, long buried and exhumed only that very night and in that same connection, were surging now in Dorcas's mind.

"I can," she said a trifle rashly, considering that the memories existed for herself alone.

There came a short pause. Then Coit spoke impressively.

"My dear," he said; "I am afraid you do not realize exactly what it is that you are saying."

And to Dorcas, listening, it was plain that, in his satisfaction over his own impressiveness, Coit's self-distrustful mood had waned.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Do you know, I believe I rather envy you," Dorcas made thoughtful observation.

Dustcloth in hand, Rica Braithwaite halted beside her guest.

"Why?" she queried.

"Because," with a little, restless gesture, Dorcas stretched out her gloved hands, then clasped them over her knee; "because you have a trick of finding things to do."

Rica Braithwaite's smile was rather inscrutable, as she made answer, —

"Yes, perhaps."

"It's a God-given faculty," Dorcas continued, still restlessly. "I used to think I had it, too; but it seems to have departed from me. I suppose I need a proper object."

Rica's eyes rested on the lawn outside the window, where Arnold Braithwaite was idling in the sun.

"Your husband?" she suggested.

Dorcas made a little gesture of amused negation.

"Fancy my striving to spur on Leonard to heights he has n't yet attained! He would thank me for harbouring the notion. He has everything, and has attained everything. Gordon is just about as bad. He has no particular vices, and not a worry to his name. I tell him that he must have been born under a particularly lucky star."

Again Rica's eyes sought the figure on the lawn, before she answered, —

"Yes. I think he was."

But Dorcas was too concerned about herself to heed the accent.

"What I need, must be a proper outlet for my energies," she reiterated, stifling a little yawn which threatened to cut her phrase in two. Then she laughed lightly. "That yawn just then is very typical. I have times of feeling exceedingly energetic, as if I'd really like to bestir myself and accomplish something. Then I suddenly realize how comf'y it is to be just lazy and contented, and I settle back once more. And yet," again she sat up alertly; "I begin to tire of being lazy. All my life, till I came here, I've had some sort of an object that I'd set my heart upon accomplishing. It was sometimes wearing work; but, after all, it was a good deal more wholesome than having everything accomplished for one. Now and then, I feel my moral muscle growing flabby. You know the sensation?"

Rica shook her head.

"I have my husband," she said tersely.

Dorcas put her elbow on her knee, her chin on her fist, and scowled malignly at the rug.

"Is that a rebuke to me?" she queried.

"Not at all. Leonard is very self-reliant," Rica answered, too hastily to heed the implication regarding her own husband.

"So is Gordon. And the worst of it all is that they appear to be making a success of managing their own concerns. What can I do? It is n't socially decent to go out into the highways and hedges, to annex a sinner as outlet for one's practical reformatory zeal. Fashion demands an institution, not an individual."

"You might take Duncan," Rica suggested idly, as she moved to and fro about the room, setting it to rights and wiping away imaginary specks of dust.

Dorcas felt her colour come. It was not the first time that Rica Braithwaite's chance suggestions had touched upon a possibility already grown familiar to her mind.

"I might," she said, as she rose and drew her sable collar up about her throat. "The subject will bear meditation. Meanwhile, I must go. A morning call should never last

much over one hour, and I have been here, two. By the way," she looked back from the doorway; "did you know that Mr. Lanier is staying at our house, this week?"

"He told me. How does it happen?"

"You must ask Gordon. He only knows how he performed the miracle. Leonard does n't appear to regard it as being quite courteous to me to entertain the Lanier clan too much."

"Clan! There is n't any. Duncan is the last of the name."

"Clan, as typified in himself, then," Dorcas said lightly. "However, I sometimes think that Leonard does n't really give the man full credit for his good points."

"He never did." Rica spoke impulsively.

Dorcas's chin lifted itself from its soft nest of fur.

"Leonard is always very just," she said quite gently. "Perhaps he sees things deeper than we do."

Then, with a merry, friendly little nod which was meant to show that her rebuke was leaving no bitterness behind, she turned and went away. Later, walking up the avenue towards home, she slowed her step from its usual brisk cadence, to give herself time to think out the possible results of Rica's chance suggestion, the same suggestion which vaguely had occurred to her more than once, since the evening of her talk with the sympathetic Buddha. Why not this object, as well as any other, for her restless energies? Her own life seemed now too well adjusted to its new groove to demand much active superintendence on her part. Being herself, she must be working passionately, untiringly to some one end. Why not take Lanier's regeneration for that end? Why not help him, what she could, in his struggle with his tragic handicap? It would lift the curse from his own manhood; and, more than that, it would lift from her husband's life the one shame it had ever known. What form her efforts would take she had not the slightest notion. That she could help Lanier, however, not only by her hard weeks

of study of his character as she had outlined it, but also by her comprehension of just such another temptation as his own: that she could help him she had no doubts whatever.

Of course, there would be a certain difficulty in stepping inside the secrets of his life. Once and a very little, he had opened the door to her. Then, taking fright at some word he had not understood, he had slammed it to again, and now he stood on guard before it. He showed himself to her as witty, wise, and altogether charming; but never, for one single instant, did he relax his hold upon the door. Her first duty — Dorcas's face lighted, as she came to this tangible conclusion — her first effort would be to charm him, to win his trust, until once more he opened it. Her step quickened, as she turned in across the lawn, eager to join her guest who sat reading in the window. She had no notion how speedily chance, anticipating all her effort, would throw down his guard, open the door and invite her to step in.

It was two days later when Rica telephoned them, late one evening. Would they all, all four, come to a pot-luck dinner, the next night? She had sent away another of the maids. There would not be very much to eat, and Betty would have to do the serving, so that it would be informal, no dress at all. It was only that she had a surprise for Dorcas. Would they come?

And Dorcas telephoned back promptly. They would, all of them. Never mind the maid. She herself could cook, if need be, and Gordon would help Betty with the serving. He insisted upon that, and upon his right to appear in tennis flannels, if he chose. As for the surprise, she could never wait till the next night.

She did wait, however, very tranquilly. She spent a portion of the intervening time in driving with Lanier whose visit at The Terraces was almost at an end. She found him in a charming mood, that day, graver than was his wont, but totally impenetrable as often as the subject of the talk veered in the direction of himself. Now and then, in the middle of a

phrase, she found his eyes resting on her with steady curiosity, and his curiosity aroused hers in its turn.

"What is it?" she asked at length, with characteristic directness.

"It?"

"The reason you keep staring at me, every now and then. Is my hat askew?" Her laugh was meant to cover her real interest in his answer.

"I have been wondering, all this morning, whether I really had seen you in the flesh before," he told her.

Her arching brows went upward.

"How else?"

"Sometimes one has a feeling of a past knowledge that has no proper basis of human introduction," he made whimsical reply. "We seem to have been born, knowing certain people that actually we do not run across till rather late in life."

She touched the horses with her lash. When she had brought them to a walk again, she spoke as indifferently as she was able.

"As it happens, Mr. Lanier, to my certain knowledge, you did see me in New York."

"When? And where?"

"One night, when we both had heard —" She hummed a *staccato* theme. "Later, in the Deanery."

Recollection dawned in his eyes.

"Were you the girl with —"

She interrupted, with an eager little nod.

"Pater? Yes, I was."

"Pater." Thoughtfully he repeated the nickname after her. "You call him that? It suits him, too. But that girl was —"

Again she interrupted.

"Most indecorously shabby? So I was. Those were my bad times. In fact," her eyes were bent upon the gray-brown stretch of road and woodland opening out before them; "I am not sure I should be here now, if Pater had n't —"

"Intervened." Lanier supplied the word at which she hesitated. Then, as if to himself, he added, "No; nor I."

That night, Rica's surprise was well-nigh perfect.

Dorcas, more simply dressed than usual with her of an evening, but with an added brilliancy come from her morning's drive and from her afternoon siesta which she had given up to going over in detail the morning's talk and, after her old constructive fashion, reading into it all sorts of meanings: Dorcas had entered the fire-lit room with Coit on one side, Lanier on the other. At first, to her eyes, the dim room seemed wholly empty. An instant later, a tall figure shot up from his chair and hurled himself across the intervening bit of floor, his hands extended.

"Dorcas, old chap! Hullo!"

"Dickie!" And, to Coit's extreme surprise, Dorcas fell upon this shabby, slangy stranger with greeting, and with question, and with enthusiastic words of happy welcome.

Later, there were the inevitable explanations. Then once more Rica switched off the lights, urging the charm of the open fire by way of an excuse; and, while she went away to superintend the final stages of the dinner, the others settled themselves in a semicircle before the hearth, with Dorcas next to Dickie and, for the hour, oblivious of all the others.

"And, now you've told me everything else, Dickie, do please explain how it is that you happen to be here," she demanded, at the end of a quarter-hour of ceaseless question and reply.

"Oh, did n't you know? Betty and I are cousins. We used to be good chums till I was too busy to come here any more, and too old to be a proper host for Betty. When I was a little kid, she used to spend an occasional vacation with me, at my ex-step-mother's; but she's too much engaged, chaperoning the angels — she was a born chaperon, if ever there was one — to have any time to come down here to look out for us. Besides," Dickie lowered his voice a little; "you know very well, Dorcas, that in these latter years my gar-

ments would never stand inspection by Uncle Arnold's valet. The chap dressed fifty times as well as I did; and he had a very sniffy curl about the nose."

"And now?"

Dickie shrugged his shoulders.

"Times has changed," he said oracularly.

And changed they had. Dorcas was quite painfully aware of that, while they sat in the dining-room, that night. Everything was dainty, everything was good. Rica was not the woman to miss that. But, compared with the old-time lavish elegance, the little feast was meagre. Braithwaite seemed distressfully conscious of the change, distressfully embarrassed by it. Even Betty's youthful poise failed her now and then, despite the chaff of Dickie and Gordon's jovial efforts to set her at her ease; but Rica went through it smilingly, to all appearing quite convinced that everything was as it should be, although the roast was beef, not game, and the ice cream came to the table, not in its accustomed laced-edged forms, but in one mammoth brick which well-nigh defied the attacks of her knife, so slippery was it in its cut-glass platter.

Nevertheless, she talked buoyantly, delightfully, throughout the meal. Later, though, when she sat alone with Dorcas in the drawing-room, waiting for the men to join them there, her buoyancy departed from her. Instead of dominating this later talk, she leaned back in her chair, as if a trifle weary, and listened in silence to Dorcas, eagerly telling over the story of her good old times with Dickie. One thing always leads to another, and Dorcas, excited by the unexpected meeting, was uncommonly garrulous, that night. In a little while, she had left the record of her good times with Dickie, and was telling over to Rica, what she always had kept back before, the record of her bad days, too, days when work went wrong, when money was getting low and lower, days when, far more than in her bits of relative success, she had learned to know Dickie for what he truly was: the loyal,

steadfast friend through thin and thick. And Rica, listening, put up her hand to shield her face from the blazing coals.

"Yes," she assented slowly; "it's the bad time that brings out the truth concerning the stuff one's made of."

And then, for just a little while, the silence dropped upon the room. Dorcas sat pondering happily, her eyes turned on the fire. But Rica still was motionless, her face shielded behind her hand where now the rings hung loosely.

At length, however, she seemed to recall herself to her duties as hostess. She drew a long breath, let her hand fall into her lap, and lifted her head to speak. Before she did speak, however, the silence was shattered by sounds from the other room: a high, insistent voice, followed by the merriest laugh conceivable, a laugh so prolonged and jolly that Dorcas, hearing it, perforce smiled in sympathy, and looked at Rica for an answering smile. There was no smile, however, on Rica Braithwaite's face, but rather a look of keenest anxiety, stiffening to a still mask of horror, as the clatter of moving chairs was followed by a second laugh, one even merrier, this time, and then by the thuds of a stumbling, falling body.

The succeeding hush seemed endless; but in reality it was only a moment later that Dickie's face appeared in the doorway.

"There's no especial cause to be frightened, Aunt Rica," he said, but without a trace of his usual cocksure jauntiness. "Mr. Lanier was — he had a fit of vertigo, and fell, before we any of us could catch him. He's better now; at least, as far as the vertigo goes; but he twisted his foot when he fell. If you don't mind showing me the telephone, I'll send word up for Mr. Coit's carriage. He wants a doctor, too, to meet the carriage at the house. What's the number, Dorcas? Or is the name enough? No; sit still, both of you. There isn't a thing to do, until the carriage gets here." And Dickie vanished, with Rica following at his heels.

Next morning, when she came back from driving her husband to the office, Dorcas went directly to the library. She

found Lanier on the couch, a crutch beside him and one foot in plaster. To her first glance, he looked a little pale; otherwise, there was no change in him, and the pallor swiftly vanished, when his brown eyes met hers. It was plain that he had been waiting for her appearing. In fact, Coit, coming down to breakfast, had brought to Dorcas the message that their guest wished to talk to her, once he was dressed and safely down the stairs. Nevertheless, as Dorcas crossed the room and sat down near him, Lanier seemed to find it hard to break the pause which had followed her conventional inquiries as regarded his injured foot.

When at last he did speak, it was with a manifest effort which once more drove every particle of colour from his cheeks.

"Dorcas," he said, with grim abruptness; "after last night, I suppose nothing that I say can make much difference."

His abruptness took her by surprise. She had awaited an opening far more conventional.

"What difference should it make?" she asked him.

"None, really. And yet now and then the under dog does crave a little pity."

She hesitated. Then, rather to her own surprise, —

"Craves it, and has it," she said gently. "The worst of all this horror comes on you."

"But the mortification," he urged her, with a curious dispassionateness.

"The worst of that is yours." She smiled a little sadly. "In spite of the lack of truth in most conventional phrases, punishment generally does work out that way."

Something in her words seemed to sting him into motion. He started to sit up, winced with the pain, and then dropped back again.

"Not always," he said then. "Granted that all the punishment is mine, I am not ready to admit the same about the fault."

"Whose is it, then?" she asked him fearlessly, while she

confessed to herself a twinge of disappointment in her ideal of the man before her that he should seek to beg off on the plea of the next man's accountability. Surely, that was not typical of the man Pater had described, nor yet of Lanier as she had judged him, earlier that same autumn.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"How should I know? Some far-back ancestor, perhaps, who never learned to keep his desires in check. They might n't of necessity have been alcoholic. He might have been a miser, or a gory-handed pirate. The main thing was that he always let himself take just what he wanted and just when he wanted it."

"Oh, don't we all?" The question slipped out inadvertently. Spoken, however, Dorcas felt no especial wish to call it back.

"After a fashion, yes. But you all don't want impossible things." Lanier turned slightly, resting on his arm, that he might face her more directly. "That is the thing you can never understand: the craving for the stuff you know will hurt you, the longing, the fierce, hungry, brutal longing for it, not so much for its own sake as for what you know it can do to you, for the wonderful exhilaration that runs through and through your veins, that puts new life into your brain, new wit upon your tongue. And then —" He broke off abruptly, and settled back into his old position, a world of fierce tragedy in his red-brown eyes. "And that's the secret of it all," he added inertly; "the secret of the trouble, and the secret of the reason that we must fight it out alone. One needs to understand, to be of any use; one never can understand, without having been through it all, himself; and we who have been through it, in the end and quite inevitably must go down."

"No!" Once more Dorcas spoke almost without volition, so intently had she been following his words. This time, however, she would have given much to have recalled her speech.

Turning again, he looked up at her with a quizzical, but sad, little smile.

"No use, Dorcas," he said, as cheerily as he was able. "It's the old argument of the enthusiast; but I know better."

As always, opposition merely stiffened her hold upon her own belief. She shook her head.

"And I know better, too. I know it, not as the enthusiast, but as the —" As a fresh wave of reticence swept over her, she searched her mind for a non-committal word.

His eyes intently on her face, Lanier pushed her past her hesitation.

"As what?" he insisted.

Her colour came, and her eyes fell before his steadfast gaze.

"As a — a — a fellow sufferer," she said, and the last words were almost inaudible.

This time, regardless of the pain, he sat up and stared at her.

"You! Child that you are, you — know?" he said, and each word fell upon the silence like a hammer.

"Wait." She glanced over her shoulder towards the open door. "You don't understand," she told him hurriedly. "I don't mean that I — am weak in the way you are. Perhaps I never shall be weak, any more. It is only that I have known the edge, the little, little thin edge, of just such a temptation —"

"And you downed it? You, a child?" he interrupted her.

Gravely she bowed her head in slow assent.

"Yes, Mr. Lanier. I did."

"Alone?"

"One never can do anything quite alone," she answered.

"In a way, I kept my secret safe, have always kept it until now."

He drew a long breath.

"Until now," he echoed. "And you have told me. I wonder why."

Happily for Dorcas, he did not press the question home. She was well aware that the present hour was not for platitudes concerning her desire to help him; she was equally aware that her present mood would render it unsafe for her to tell him how her nature, of its own volition, had answered to the crying needs of his. Her nerves were throbbing with their talk, throbbing with her effort to guide it along lines best for him, just as of old they had throbbed when she had been approaching the successful finale of a difficult chapter of her work. It was all a part of her own intense nerve vitality, yet all so strangely impersonal. Even as she sat there at his side, looking from his bandaged foot to the fluctuating colour in his cheeks and the restless red head against the dull green cushions, in all her pity for him, in all her own anxiety to speak the most sane and helpful word, she yet was conscious of the scene itself in its entirety, of herself as one of the artistic elements of the stage setting. It even seemed to her that, in a sense, her real self was sitting quite apart, watching the situation, as if it were being worked out for herself, the one spectator. The spectator was Dorcas Coit; but the real actor was none other than Dorcas Sloane, her old, old self. And the spectator wondered, even as Lanier himself had done, just why the actor had chosen to break her reticence for him.

"I wonder why," he iterated slowly.

With intention, she disregarded the later phrase, and fell back upon the earlier.

"I had good friends in those days," she answered him. "I knew Dickie, and dear old Pater. They both knew that there was something very wrong. Neither one of them ever stopped to ask me what it was; they just stood by and held me steady." She drew a long breath. Then she added, still very slowly, still with deliberate intention, "And, in a time like that, friends do count, you know."

And, as she spoke, she held out to him her hand.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NEXT afternoon, she came to him again, as he lay there in the library. Simply and without preface, she told him all the dreary little story.

"It was cocaine, you know," she told him. "In a way, it's the deadliest of all temptations; and it came to me, when I was at the lowest ebb, came as the one tool I needed to complete my chosen work."

"And the work?" he asked her.

An utter dreariness crept into her voice, weighing down heavily the single word of her reply, —

"Gone."

"But it will come again?"

She shook her head.

"Not even the shadow of its ghost," she answered, and her accent took away all trace of fun out of her whimsical reply.

And Lanier, perforce, was silent. Indeed, there had been no especial clue as to what sort of answer he best would make. Dorcas's story had been a complete surprise to him in certain of its phases. That she had known her bad times, he had found out from her admitting her own identity with the threadbare girl whom he had seen with Pater. That her past life had held in it anything worse than work and a comfortable edge of poverty, however, had never crossed his mind until the previous morning. He had lain awake, most of the night, trying to recast his notions of her, to weld his knowledge of her present with her own references to her past.

Lanier looked curiously old and worn, that afternoon.

Even the short confinement was coming on his nerves; and, to the doctor alone, he had confessed to a good deal of pain in his foot. Added to that, his vigil of the night before had not been altogether helpful to his swift recovery. Sleep had been out of the question. He had heard the clocks in the house strike every hour but one; and, worse, his insomnia had been denied the relief of thrashing to and fro across the bed. His mind had done all the needful thrashing, however. It had ranged over the whole face of human history and psychological analysis. At the end of every journey, it always had come back to one of two main points: the maddening recollection of a glance which had passed between Dickie and Gordon, at the instant of his fall; and the wonder how a mere slip of a girl like Dorcas had come to know what the word *temptation* meant, and then had come to down it. Next day, as far as one can know the secrets of another's life, Lanier knew.

What he did not know, however, had been the fashion in which Dorcas Coit had spent the rest of the day, after she had left him in the library, with a bell and an infinity of books and papers within easy reach of his hand. The bell he had accepted grimly, as outward symbol of his spiritual bondage and consequent dependence upon others whose steps were free. The papers he scorned utterly. They held nothing one half so interesting to him as the problems inherent in himself. All day long, he lay there, his hands clasped behind his head, and his brow furrowed, while he thought and thought about himself, or, when that subject at last lost somewhat of its interest, thought and thought of Dorcas Coit. His thoughts, moreover, were more stimulating than they were restful.

Dorcas, meanwhile, had gone out, directly after luncheon. For some reason she could not fathom, she felt an imperative need of the fresh air, the same sort of need she had known, aforetime, in New York. She wanted the air, and swift, strong exercise. More than that, she wanted them

alone. At the luncheon table, she had forced herself into vivacious interest in Coit's business life; she had flooded him with questions that he could see no especial cause to answer, unless the eager brilliancy of her face, the caressing intonations of her voice, might have been construed into a cause. But, when he did answer them with grave courtesy, Dorcas drew a long breath of relief. Her unsteady nerves were finding a great restfulness in her husband's quiet, even voice, his steadfast manner. After the excitement of her talk with Lanier, of all that it had brought back into her mind, she felt it good to come back again to Coit, to talk to him quite simply about practical details and to rely upon their mutual love to do away with any need for reservations. However, Coit gone back to the office for the afternoon, Dorcas's restlessness returned upon her. For an instant, she hesitated irresolutely outside the library door. Then, her lips shut into a hard line, she went away up to her room and dressed for walking.

It was a good two hours later when she went up the Braithwaite steps, tired in body, but singularly refreshed in mind. Her secret hope was that she would find Dickie; but Dickie had gone up to the country club with Betty, and Rica made tea for just herself and Dorcas. Later, cup in hand, she abandoned the table and came to sit by Dorcas close beside the fire.

"You say Duncan is doing fairly well?" she queried then.

Dorcas nodded, a cloud of sudden recollection in her eyes. For the hour, Lanier had been quite forgotten. Now her mind flew back to him with renewed absorption.

"Poor old Duncan!" Rica was saying sadly. "It's an interminable losing fight. And we all have cared so much for him."

Dorcas disregarded the final phrase.

"Why losing?" she asked, with all her old directness.

"Because — it is." And Rica stirred her tea, content with her own reasoning.

Dorcas's directness increased. Her voice became as keen as a surgeon's scalpel.

"Has he lost ground in the last ten years?"

Rica reflected silently, silently shook her head.

"N-no," she said slowly then. "The trouble comes and goes. Sometimes he is steady for months; sometimes he has a — a failure, every two or three days. It all depends."

"On what?" Dorcas demanded.

Rica's answer came drearily.

"On himself. On his courage, his nerves, perhaps his health. Who knows?"

"You think it does depend upon his health?"

"Dorcas, I don't think," Rica replied a little restively, for, in her secret heart, she felt that this catechism concerning her old friend had no right to come from an acquaintance of a few weeks' standing. "The trouble is. It's very intermittent. Moreover, I suppose we none of us have any notion of what the poor man suffers in the intervals. It would be so much better for him, if he did n't have all this leisure on his hands. When you think of it, he has n't a thing to think of but himself."

"Why does n't he do something, then?" Dorcas asked, with sudden impatience.

"What?"

"Anything. Go into some profession. Take up some business."

A new look came into Rica Braithwaite's eyes, deadening the interest in Lanier which it replaced. Her voice went all the long way from sadness to utter hopelessness.

"Dorcas, that's easier to say than do. Duncan Lanier is n't a young man, though he looks a boy beside poor Arnold. And this is the day of the young man, the merciless day of the crudely young. A man of forty may hang on for years; but he is at a hopeless disadvantage in taking hold in the first place."

"Leonard," Dorcas asked abruptly, that same evening; "what are the Braithwaites living on?"

Coit looked up from his paper; but, before he could speak, Gordon had cut in.

"His debts, poor chap," he answered. "That is, it's what the boys down at the office say."

Dorcas frowned instinctively at the idea. Despite her own experience of grinding poverty, debts were still loathly to her.

"Not fair, Gordon!" she retorted. "He's not the man to have debts, and, even if he were, Rica never would allow them."

Coit flung aside his paper, rose and stood facing them, his elbow on the mantel. He was looking younger than usual, that night, in the gay, soft housecoat he had put on since dinner, and also by reason of his contentment at having the unwonted luxury of an idle evening spent at home. Now, at Dorcas's quick retort, he smiled down at her, and the smile was full of the quiet content which filled his being.

"You like Rica, at last?" he queried.

"Like her!" Dorcas flashed swiftly. "I think she is a heroine."

Coit broke away his point of ash. Then, —

"I always have thought so," he made quiet answer.

"After all," Gordon broke in, with youthful arrogance; "she had no business to allow him to run himself into such a tangle of debts, in the first place."

Dorcas laughed at his tone.

"That shows you are a bachelor still, Gordon. Once you're married, you won't talk about what she will allow." Then, seeing a little shadow on her husband's face, she rose and stood beside him, her hand upon his arm where it lay across the mantel. "You know you are a tyrant, Leonard; you husbands all are. But," her voice grew grave again; "to go back to Rica Braithwaite: I do think she is wonderfully plucky. Her excuses for the present situation are wonderful, too. To hear her talk, you'd never suspect her deadly

hatred of what she calls, in fun, their simple life. She never complains, never acts as if anything were wrong; but it is taking it out of her, just the same."

"I noticed she was n't looking well, last night," Gordon said thoughtfully. "I spoke of it to Betty."

"That was considerate of you, Gordon," Dorcas retorted, in frank sarcasm. "I thought better of you than that. Betty was probably a good deal more aware of it than you were, yourself."

"Then what harm in telling her?" Gordon made practical question.

"Because we women never trust our own doubts, till somebody else shows us just how probable they are," Dorcas assured him flatly.

Coit interposed, speaking with palpable anxiety.

"You really think Rica is worrying?" he asked.

"Worry! She's working, Leonard, working hard enough to wear me to skin and bone, and I was brought up to work. Rica was n't, and that makes all the difference."

"But what does she do?" Coit questioned, with the vagueness a man always feels regarding a woman's daily domestic cares.

"Everything. In that great house, where they used to have a man and four maids, they have one half-trained woman to do all the work. As result, Rica and Betty do the work, and the woman scrubs around after them. It keeps her busy, too." In all her perturbation, Dorcas stopped to laugh a little. "They are wonderfully efficient; but they've not the slightest idea of saving any work, and they make as much more as they accomplish. And Rica sews, not embroidery, as she used, but clothes. To-day, I caught her lining the sleeves of Arnold's last-year overcoat. Oh, she's clever! And the worry of it all! The going without things! And then the making up specious fibs to save appearances! They eat only prunes for breakfast, because of some new health theory — idiocy, I call it — that says we eat too

much of too many things. They sit in the dark, all evening, because they love the open fire. Leonard, that is what takes it out of a woman, the stepping down so gracefully that one does n't exhibit one's shabby, shabby shoes. It is n't the mere poverty that kills; it's the contrasts it shows up, and the having to account for them to people who are looking on. Leonard, Rica Braithwaite is a heroine. In her place, I'd give cold poison to her husband. Why does n't he get up and do something?"

At her impetuous question, a second cloud, this time of quite another sort, came across Coit's face.

"Rica says he is n't well," he made cautious answer.

"Well! He's well enough to help her out a little bit. Leonard, is that man really ill, or lazy?"

Coit hesitated. Then, in common honour, he forced himself to answer.

"Neither, Dorcas — very. The trouble is, he's finding it hard to get in anywhere."

"In!" She flung the word back at him sharply. "Then why in the world did he get out?"

There came a short silence, before Coit replied briefly, —

"Business reasons." And then, with a grave finality that brought the colour to Dorcas's cheeks, he changed the subject.

It was Gordon who, a little later, spoke of Lanier first.

"It seems rather a shame to be loafing here with you, and leaving Uncle Duncan alone upstairs to ponder upon his own undoing," he remarked, and the honest pity in his voice belied his flippant phrase.

"Dorcas," Coit spoke suddenly; "does Lanier's being here make things hard for you?"

She glanced up in surprise at the question.

"Oh, no, Leonard. Why should it?"

"Of course, the servants are supposed to look out for him," Coit said thoughtfully. "Still, there's bound to be a certain strain in having him about, when one considers the cause.

Besides," the rare colour came into his face; "the man's no real relation."

Dorcas spoke promptly, her hand on his.

"That makes no difference, Leonard. Besides, in a sense, he is. It would n't be quite loyal, if we either one of us forgot it."

"Thanks!" Gordon put in briefly, from across the room.

She sent him a smile of comprehension. Nothing about the great, jovial boy had pleased her more than did his steady loyalty to the memory of his own mother, a loyalty which had waned no whit before his increasing devotion to herself, his increasing comprehension of all her points of view. Then she turned back to her husband.

"Leonard," she said slowly; "it would be brutal not to make Mr. Lanier welcome here. It was his sister's home; the old hospitality ought to hold good. Besides, with Gordon here, his one real blood kinsman, and with us his friends, it ought to be his right to come and go here as he will."

"But — the constant possibility?" Coit reminded her gravely.

"I know. I realize all that. However, he can't harm us; and we even may be able to do him some little good. No; listen, Leonard. I'm not sentimental in this thing, not hysterical. It's only that I know, out of my own life, what a help a steady friend or two can be."

His eyes full on her brilliant, pleading face, Coit nodded in slow assent. His little smile showed her quite plainly that he accepted her reference as to himself; and Dorcas loved her husband far too deeply now to wish to hurt him by the frank avowal that her real thought had been, not of him, her husband, but of two other men: Dickie, and Pater.

"Dad," Gordon said to him, when they were left alone, that night; "you're worried in your mind."

Slowly his father nodded. Then, when he had lighted a fresh cigar, he spoke.

"Yes, Gordon. I am."

"But why?"

"I'm sorry Lanier is crippled, here in this house."

"But why?" Gordon asked again, and, this time, his accent showed displeasure.

"Because, after all said and done, there's something infernally appealing about the fellow," Coit said grimly. "He's likable and clever; and then there's the added interest of his plaster bandage to complicate the rest of his afflictions. I only hope he does n't make things hard for Dorcas."

"Uncle Duncan is a gentleman." Gordon spoke defensively.

"Exactly. That makes it worse. He is a gentleman; what's more, he has no notion of the effect he has upon us all. Gordon, since that man's first upset, we've all stood by, and suspended judgment, and made excuses for him. And," Coit hesitated; then he added, with a seeming lack of logic; "and Dorcas is such a child."

Gordon looked up sharply.

"Not a child," he contradicted. "In some ways, dad, she's older than I — may ever be."

But Leonard Coit's eyes were clouded, when he went to bed, that night. He was anxious; but his anxiety held no distrust of Dorcas. It was only that the clairvoyance of his love for her made him realize that things might go badly with her, in the next few weeks; and that, by reason of his very trust in her, of his exceeding love for her, he was the more powerless to take a single step to undo it, or even to forestall.

Next afternoon, had Coit been in the library at The Terraces, he would have felt an increased surety that things were likely to go badly, badly for Lanier as well as Dorcas. His older, keener eyes would have probed the secret of the little flush upon Lanier's cheeks, the weary droop of the expressive lips, the deep, thin lines between the narrow brows. Even to Coit's masculine gaze, there would have been something very pitiful in the tall figure lying inertly on the couch,

his foot in plaster, his hand upon his crutch, his face looking so gaunt and hopeless: something pitiful and appealing. And not far across the room sat Dorcas, her eyes blazing with the excitement of living over again the half-forgotten details of the old, feverish existence, her face gentle with pity for the man before her, and lighted with the consciousness, so often coming to her in those early winter days, of the curiously clairvoyant understanding which seemed to do away with any need of spoken words between them. Dorcas herself would have been the first one to aver that all her love belonged to Leonard Coit. None the less, Coit's presence never stirred her to any such excitement as she was feeling now. Coit filled her heart and soul completely; but she was conscious of loosely sagging places in her mind and in her nervous system; worse still, in that most vulnerable point of all, her old ambition to make good. Within her wedded life, it seemed to her that Coit was doing all the making.

Outside the window just beyond the couch, the gray November rain beat heavily across the dull air. Within the room, too, the light was gray and dull. Across the dullness, Lanier's vivid hair, his lambent eyes, made little spots of positive colour, spiritual as well as purely of physics. And Dorcas, in the silence, sat and watched him, and tried to realize all that he might have been, without his handicap. Only a week or two before, she had loathed him, scorned him. Now she scorned herself hotly for that scorn. As justly she might have scorned his injured foot. Both were weaknesses; both were more pitiful than blameworthy.

Suddenly Dorcas pulled herself up sharply, straightening herself with an abrupt gesture of something closely akin to dismay. Was she dropping her belief in human accountability, she who had ground a bottle into fragments underneath her heels? Was she, a modern, broadly-educated woman who had seen a little of the world and who had theorized about it as sternly as she had been able: was she to turn a mawkish sentimentalist before a crutch and a pair of drooping lips and

two melancholy red-brown eyes? She shook herself, delighting in the mere physical motion of casting aside the unwelcome idea; and, while she shook herself, she smiled a little at the sudden recollection of Dickie's strictures concerning her predilection for damaged heroes. Was Lanier destined to be another of them?

Lanier had seen the little smile. Seeing, it was not strange that he misunderstood.

"You are not sorry to have lost it, after all?" he queried.

"It?" Dorcas's eyes were blank.

"Your work. You are better off without it?"

"It depends on what you mean by better. It's easier, of course, to slide along from day to day, with neither work nor worry; easier, but I suspect it's not so wholesome," she told him, as soon as she could recall her mind to what had gone before. "And yet, I miss it horribly: the struggle and the strain and the occasional little minutes of accomplishment, the feeling you must achieve a certain thing, or else sit down to the confession that, after all, your life here has n't amounted to a row of pins."

"It's what I am facing, every day," he answered, and his voice was dreary.

"Not in the same way," she persisted, too much absorbed, for the moment, in herself to heed his own problem, unsolved though it was and, to all seeming, quite insoluble. "I feel, even now, that I have it all inside me. Even now, I have days of being restless, of feeling that I must be up and busy about something that really, truly counts. Of course," her brave eyes clouded just a little at the memory; "I know now that all my writing was mere nonsense, know now that, if I work at all, I must work in some other way. But," with her old impetuous gesture, she swept her clasped hands down across her lap; "but, Mr. Lanier, I must achieve something, find some object that I can struggle slowly towards. You don't know the feeling, I suppose: the love of struggle for its own sake, the longing to accomplish something —

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anything, rather than allow one's self to be buried, prematurely and neck-deep, in Nirvana."

He chewed his upper lip irresolutely. Then, —

"Dorcas, I don't need to," he told her, and his voice was gloomy. "I have my struggle always waiting for me. No; wait! You say you have known what temptation may be, for a little while. Can you think what it is to have it always ready for you, always waiting for you, at farthest, just around the corner? To know the longing, the smothering, crushing longing for the little bit of exhilaration which puts new life into you by the very way it allows you to forget, for just a little while, the danger? Can you imagine what it is to have the surety that, sooner or later, you are bound to give in; that you are n't as strong as the temptation; that it is certain to down you? And can you imagine the sickening realization, afterwards, that you are nothing but a sorrow and a shame to the people who are tied to you by blood? My sister, Dorcas, might have helped me; she was older than I, and infinitely stronger. Instead — "

"Hush!" Dorcas bade him fearlessly. "She is n't here to defend herself."

"Could she?" Lanier made brief question.

A sudden instinct warned Dorcas that the sting of truth was sometimes tonic.

"She suffered, too," she said deliberately. "Did you ever think of the sorrow you brought on her, and the mortification, the fear of what might come at any hour, and then the shame and pity, when at last it did come?"

Lanier stirred uneasily.

"Shame," he admitted; "but not pity."

"How do you know? We women keep our secrets," Dorcas told him proudly. "You would have been the last to know the things she must have suffered."

But Lanier shook his head.

"We — drunkards," he laid a curiously insistent stress upon the hideous word; "have an extra sense at times, a

supernatural cunning in unravelling the thoughts of other people. God knows we need it, too; it is our only way of separating people, of telling those who pity us from those who merely scorn us, as she did. Coit himself, stern as he is, was infinitely less hard."

He was silent, and Dorcas, watching the grim thoughts chase one another across his mobile face, fell to wondering whether he had unravelled her own tangled feeling, whether he classed her as pitiful, or as one who merely scorned. She was roused from her wonderings by Lanier's sudden motion, as he lifted himself upon one elbow.

"Dorcas," he said, and she started, when his next words answered her unspoken question; "don't despise me too utterly. Because temporarily you too have known the edge of what I suffer all the time, you ought to be a little bit more merciful than any of the others. But you are not. You only look at the downfalls, at the repeated failures. You won't see the strain that comes between, the agony on agony of trying. You won't even see the little shreds of the temptation, the trifles that, of themselves, are nothing; but that, taken unexpectedly and in one's time of greatest weakness, the time they always do appear, can undermine a month of steady building by an instant's pin-prick. Dorcas," heedless now of his bandaged foot, he sat upright and faced her with blazing eyes and gaunt and graying face; "I had n't meant to tell you this; but, in justice to myself, it is fair that you should know it, fair to know the part one's friends can play, unwittingly, in the whole ugly situation. You remember the day I took your tea?" Vainly he tried to soften the scorn upon the word; but Dorcas, listening, writhed. "That was a case in point. Months before, I had been at the lowest ebb of things, at the worst level I have ever reached. Then, one night, I met the man you call — and justly — Pater. I was drunk. I knew it, knew that I was making myself gloriously conspicuous; but I did n't care. And then Pater appeared from somewhere, and took me home with him. Next

day, when I was steadier, he talked the matter out with me, and persuaded me to go through a cure. I had been out of it, two months, when I came here with Gordon. They sent me out, cured only for as long as I let the stuff alone. I did n't want it; I had stopped caring for it until I took a taste of it again. And," his face hardened, all but his eyes which now were full of pity for himself because of what he had been, for her because of what he, in his self-centred weakness, felt it was just that she should hear; "and, that afternoon, you offered me tea. And I took it and drank it down, just at a minute when I was too intent on something Leonard said to know or care if it were tea, or hemlock."

It was long before Dorcas spoke.

"And then?" she said at last quite steadily.

"Then?" Lanier's passing excitement seemed to wane. He lay back on his pillows wearily. "Then it was all to do over again."

And Dorcas, sitting there beside him, could only clinch her hands together, lest she betray her absolute humiliation at the memory. And she had thought to help him in his present trouble, she its guilty cause! She shut her teeth together — hard. In the old, weary, worrying days, surely life had offered for her solution no problem half so grim as this.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was a month before Lanier's foot was once more fit for use, a month to him of leaden hours, of weariness with all things, himself included, of discouragement and, sometimes, of something infinitely worse. Like most men who never have known a day's real illness in their lives, he chafed inwardly at the restraint which he sought to bear with outward stoicism. Moreover, he could not read, all the time; Coit and Gordon were at the office, the whole day long. Dorcas, as the season's gayety drew towards the first little climax just before the holidays, was too busy with the duties of her bridehood and of her place as mistress of The Terraces to give him more than an occasional morning hour of gossip and, even more occasionally, a stray half-hour after she came in from tea. Lanier, then, left mainly to himself and to the servants, spent long hours of lying flat upon his back, his eyes upon the ceiling and his hands clasped behind his head, chewing his lips and thinking over all the things he might have done with himself; and meanwhile doing his best to forget the craving which, day by day, increased within him. It was not so much a thirst as it was a vague, restless longing for the cheer which the gratification of that thirst would bring, a cheer of which, in all truth, he felt himself in direst need just now.

The accident had been solely the result of his own fault, of, not to mince matters, his own befuddlement. He had only himself to blame; unless — He hated himself for his own unwonted lack of chivalry, as, involuntarily, his mind went backward to that careless glass of tea. That had been

the broken stitch whence all this later unravelling had come. For some strange reason, since his "cure" had been complete, he had felt no tingling of his appetite, even when he had been confronted with the sight and odour of good wine. He had been able to look on with stoic unconcern, while the men about him drank, some prudently, some to excess. Until the savour of the rum was in his throat and nostrils, he had been free, literally and absolutely free, from all temptation. And since? He scowled malignly at the painted ceiling, and shrugged his shoulders. What would Pater say? Good old Pater, who had predicted such great things from his cure? And then Lanier smiled dully to himself, as he realized his own adoption of Dorcas's name for his old friend. But it did fit him wonderfully.

Since then? Lanier's brows contracted. The appetite had been upon him when he had gone back to New York; had remained upon him until, quite deliberately, he had made his plans for a three-day disappearance from the knowledge of his kind. Long years before, Lanier had learned the trick of arranging for such vanishings. He also had learned that, once he vanished and came back again, the desire would stand off from him for long, perhaps even for many weeks. During the interval, he would reappear in his old social groove, looking a little worn, perhaps, but otherwise unchanged; would take up the thread of his life just at the point where he had dropped it. The worst of the whole matter lay in the uncertainty as to the time when it would snap again; that wore his nerves threadbare, then tore the threads to tatters. Moreover, however wearing was the uncertainty, it was not a thing a man could talk about, demanding sympathy. He could only smile and make vague allusions to his weak digestion, to his insomnia, to anything, in short, except the truth.

And with the appetite, this time, had also come a curious weakening of all his moral fibre. His fighting strength was temporarily paralyzed; his viewpoint was far less disparag-

ing as concerned himself. His customary attitude, nowadays, was not militant so much as self-apologetic; his weaknesses seemed to him pitiful, but not at all disgraceful. Instead, the disgrace lay upon those others who neglected to forestall each moment of temptation. Theirs was the shame; theirs also was the blame. Natural and even justifiable as this new attitude appeared to Duncan Lanier, there yet remained certain older strains in his mental make-up which permitted him, at the same time, to view it critically, to realize the slow degeneration which it marked, even to remember that the doctor at the sanatorium had warned him of such a result which would be bound to follow upon the heels of renewed dissipation. Just so long as he remained steady, as so easily he might do, all would be well. Once he overstepped the limits established by his cure, the doctor told him grimly, either his physical or his moral heart would stop its normal functions. Which it would be, depended solely on which one was the weaker. Time was proving the truth of the doctor's prediction, proving, too, that Lanier's physical aorta was a good deal stronger than his moral one.

This time, however, the immune period had lasted a full month. Without warning, the desire had come back on him, just as they had been starting for the Braithwaite dinner. He had stood out against it, all the early part of the dinner. Then, when the women had left them, when Gordon had been doing his buoyant best to arouse Arnold Braithwaite from his dull depression, and when Coit and Dickie, in another corner, were busy glorying in the ripened charms of Dorcas, Lanier's hand had shut on a decanter. Afterwards, merry, witty, curiously magnetic in his exhilaration, he suddenly had found that he was dominating all the talk, engrossing all the attention of the four men about him. A moment later, he had seemed to himself to realize that upon himself alone had devolved the duty of leading the way into the drawing-room. Even now, and his blood burned his veins at the memory, he recalled one sharp glance ex-

changed between his nephew and Dickie. He recalled nothing more until, his foot throbbing intolerably within its plaster shell, he lay in his own bed in a guest room at The Terraces. Before he fell asleep, he managed to piece together the two ends of the story, to supply from his past experience the missing middle part. As yet, this was by far the worst cropper that he had come.

Nevertheless, as the days dragged by, he was quite well aware that, unless he stayed on guard, he was likely to come a worse. All his life, since he had been old enough to apply the methods of self-analysis, he had known that his trouble came to him in waves, in cycles which recurred from time to time, their curves varying in extent, but not in shape. They came apparently out of nothing, passed the danger-mark, increased to the point of temporary satiety, and then vanished as suddenly as they came. And his fighting strength held good only at their start. Now, sooner or later, Lanier knew that nothing but a miracle could prevent another, greater fall. He shut his teeth and the drops of moisture started on his brow, as he reckoned up the almost inevitable chances, and measured them against the equally inevitable days when he was doomed to be crippled and tied to the alternatives of the library couch and his own bed. Unthinkable that the second overturn should come upon him in the house of Leonard Coit, the man who had never fathomed his temptation, or showed him mercy in his struggles! And Dorcas!

It was when Lanier thought about Dorcas that he came nearest to forgetting himself and his own problems. From the first, Dorcas had attracted him, first by her vivid, haughty young beauty, later by her downright ways, her simple, loyal faith in her own ideals of what her womanhood should be, of, more, what it should achieve. At first, he had watched her as a pretty puzzle, curious to see the end towards which she would work out her relation to Coit. That the working-out would be hers, Lanier had scanty doubt, no more doubt

than he had that the present attitude could not last indefinitely. He knew Coit to be a thing of iron, straight, strong, and inflexible. He also knew, or thought he knew, that certain of his standards were alien to Dorcas's ideals. That, once the issue arose, it was inevitable that there should come a clash between them. And, meanwhile, Coit's feeling to Dorcas amounted to an adoration, the adoration of a strong man for his favourite, his long-desired, possession. But Dorcas, in Lanier's eyes, was by no means the child, the pretty, plastic toy she seemed to Coit. When Coit should waken to the truth, when the issue would arise; then would come the question. And what then? Lanier's month of inactivity by no means touched his brain. Mercifully for his self-respect, it never once occurred to him that he himself was destined to become the issue. So much, at least, was spared him.

Dorcas, meanwhile, felt that Lanier had spared her nothing. It needed days for her to rally from the shock of the accountability that he had laid upon her; to rally, that is, so far as she was destined ever to do. After a discovery like that, life is never quite the same, never quite so irresponsible. It is the price one pays for learning that one is a power among one's weaker fellows. It came hardest of all on Dorcas, whose whole experience had made for responsibility. The mischief was done; all that was left for her was the setting to work to make amends.

For an hour after she had left Lanier and gone away to her own room, Dorcas sat passive, her chin upon her fists, and her eyes upon Buddha's placid countenance. At last, she spoke.

"It's desire that upsets us all, Buddha," she said slowly. "It's the universal disease; but I suppose it brings forth its own results. I imagine you have it, too, somewhere inside you, though I must say you don't look it. Or have you outgrown it? And will I outgrow it, once I get fat and gray like you?"

Lacking an answer, she once more fell into reverie. It was long before she spoke again.

"It appears to be my next work, Buddha. I can't say that I enjoy the prospect, though. It's bound to be strenuous, and, in certain of its phases, not to be exactly — pretty. Why can't all men be decent, godly gentlemen like Leonard? Or else, nice, clean boys like Gordon? And yet — Buddha, I'm not a fatalist, and yet I can't help thinking that the hand of Fate is in this thing. Why else did I employ my brains and — my tonic — in working out just such a man into a set of equations? To be sure, I had one unknown quantity too many, and my equations would n't prove. Maybe I shall prove them now, though. And why, just then, did that blessed old Dickie babble to me about the next man's soul? And why, just yesterday, just the very day before I found out all the mess I had made of his life, why did Rica Braithwaite point out the man as my especial care? Oh, Buddha! Life is interesting; but it's much more restful to motor about with Leonard than it is really to live. Only — I'm not so sure that it's what we're put here for."

Later, however, she was destined to know.

And so it was that Dorcas Coit took on her young shoulders the task of regenerating Duncan Lanier. Restiveness, ambition, a sense of accountability, and a year-long perspective of unanalyzed, and yet intense, attraction; these were the elements that summed themselves up into a total which drove her to her task. Much in the mood of determination in which she had gone about her novel, Dorcas now went about Lanier's regeneration. She clothed Lanier, as she had clothed the novel, in a mantle of potential perfection, woven by her own loyal hands.

As first step in the regenerating process, she gave him all the time that she could spend from her social duties which, day by day, were waxing more insistent. To Lanier, lonely and bored and grimly fighting off the day of his inevitable undoing, it was very little. To Dorcas, it was much, although

it summed itself up in an hour of the mid-morning, another hour between tea and time to dress for dinner. With him, she was the blithest possible companion, or else, in his more gloomy moods, the most sympathetic comrade that man could desire. Meanwhile, it would be idle to affirm that Dorcas found their hours together irksome. Despite his admitted weaknesses, she liked Lanier better with each passing day, gained clearer apprehension of his underlying and abortive possibilities for manhood, better appreciation of the courage which was by no means always downed. Strange to say, her innate womanhood took no alarm at his manifest and growing dependence on her company. The same spiritual myopia which had blinded her to certain elements of peril in her New York life, now held her just as safely blinded to any false interpretations that might well be placed upon her growing intimacy with Duncan Lanier. Her present duty, self-imposed and all the more insistent for that reason, bade her set to work to save him, no matter what the cost to her in ease and social happiness. His life, Pater had told her, months on months before, would have been a thing of rare beauty, save for the blighting influence of his congenital curse. It was her present part in life to help in the annulling of that curse.

December slowly drew along towards Christmas; and, with the approach of the holidays, the social tide slackened a little. Other people, Coit included, were too busy planning Christmas gifts to dine and dance. Dorcas, however, was too busy thinking of Lanier, who of late had seemed to her increasingly depressed, despite the doctor's bulletins of speedy convalescence. Lanier, on his side, was busy, too, very busy. He was trying in vain to plan how to forestall the worst consequences of the bad day, coming now so swiftly and so near at hand. His nights were one unending torture to him now; his daylight hours a period of maddening self-restraint. How long the restraint would last, he did not know. And Coit would be so sternly implacable, so cen-

serious, and yet so coldly just. And Wier was so unbribeable. Not all of Dorcas's merry tact, nowadays, was able to rouse Lanier from his gloom. The charm had left his mobile face; the magnetism had gone out of all his personality. For the time being, Duncan Lanier was a sick and irritable man, courteous only by generations-long training and tradition, not by kindly instinct.

And then, after a morning of moody, morose silence, a morning when Dorcas, illogical as are most women, was more than ever conscious of the important place Lanier was taking in her life, she had decided to cancel an afternoon engagement for the sake of cheering up a depressed and testy invalid. She had said nothing to Coit about her purpose, not from any sense of concealment, but because of a motherly wish to protect Lanier from her husband's just resentment of his churlishness. Then, Coit gone back to his office, she had turned from the window where always she lingered to watch him out of sight when he went away without her, and, crossing the hall, she started to open the door of the library, where Lanier was still a prisoner on the couch. To her surprise, Wier met her in the doorway.

"Perhaps you'd best not go inside just now, Mrs. Coit," he said, and his tone was grave.

She looked up in astonishment. Upon Wier's lips, the words had all the force of a prohibition.

"Why not?" she asked him.

Wier answered, without the slightest hesitation.

"Mr. Lanier is asleep, Mrs. Coit. He has been feeling very ill; but at last he has fallen asleep."

Nevertheless, Dorcas, looking into the man's impenetrable British face, realized that Wier was lying.

However, in the absence of Gordon and her husband, she felt that her only dignified course would be to accept the lie. Accordingly, —

"Is he feeling better, Wier?" she asked, as inexpressively as she was able.

Wier bowed, with the respectful hauteur of his profession.

"Yes, Mrs. Coit. I think the worst of the attack is over now."

Dorcas was conscious of a momentary desire to test Wier's impassivity with the flat of her right hand. Did the man think he was imposing on her credulity with his fable? Or was all this merely the set of conventional phrases of which her past experience had left her unaware? In any case, it irritated her that decorum forbade her openly talking of the case with Wier under its true name. Her irritation showed itself in the accent of her next question.

"Does Mr. Coit know about it, Wier?" she demanded.

Wier mistook her irritation for uneasiness. He sought to reassure her.

"I saw no need of telling Mr. Coit," he replied, with becomingly modest self-importance. "The attack came on quite suddenly, while you were eating the birds. The footman came to tell me, and I went directly to the library. By the time Mr. Coit had finished his luncheon, I saw that there would be no recurrence of the trouble; at least, not for the present. I saw no need to speak of it to Mr. Coit; you need feel no uneasiness."

"Uneasiness!" Dorcas's nerves sought refuge in a laugh. "Did you suppose I was afraid that Mr. Coit would discipline him, Wier?" And, her laugh still a little nervous, by reason of Wier's portentous gravity, Dorcas went her way, leaving the butler standing at gaze, while he ruminated yet once again upon the careless vagaries of his young lady.

Coit came in for tea at an unusually early hour. He was met upon the threshold by Wier who, in exchange for Coit's hat and coat and stick, gave back the information that Mrs. Coit had gone to see Mrs. Braithwaite, and that Lanier was resting in his room. Coit accepted the information without question and, thankful for the vacating of his library, settled himself there to smoke and read in peace. Dorcas, meanwhile, was rising from her place before the Braithwaite fire.

"The worst of it all is, Rica," she said slowly; "the man can't stay on indefinitely at The Terraces."

Rica shook her head.

"It's not fair to Leonard," she said vaguely, for she was mindful of her talk with Coit, three days before, when they all had been dining with a common friend. Rica had made leading remarks, and Coit had parried them. Nevertheless, Rica had seen a little frown, a little knitting of the brows, and had drawn her own conclusions. An older woman, and a loyal friend, she could view things with a perspective which Dorcas was too near, too immature, to gain.

Dorcas laughed blithely at her words.

"Dear old Leonard! He does n't care. He would n't mind it, if we had a dozen chronic invalids for guests, granted they did n't get in the way of our good times together. In fact, I think he gets a good deal of amusement out of my struggles to bring up Mr. Lanier in the way that he should go. It makes Gordon cross; but Leonard revels in hearing all the absurd details." Then her voice changed, grew troubled. "They are absurd, Rica, absurd and paltry. That's the worst of it. If one only could live on a steady diet of high tragedy, it would all seem so much more worth the while. And yet, in spite of to-day, it seems to me I must be accomplishing just a little bit of good. Else, what's the use of influence and effort?"

None the less, her courage well-nigh failed her, during the next two days, when Lanier remained shut up in his room, when Gordon was glum, Coit grave, and Wier's bulletins noncommittal. The bit of good, despite her protestations, seemed so very, very little; the future outcome of it all so doubtful. To make the bad seem all the worse, by force of contrast, Christmas was now close at hand. The holly wreaths that Wier was hanging in the windows threw gloomy circles of shadow on the rooms within, just as the outside spirit of good will threw into darker shade the tense and suspicious unrest which lay upon The Terraces.

And, as for Peace on Earth —

Dorcas, sitting alone beside the fire, lifted her head to listen. Far off, in the upper hall-way, she heard the well-known tap of Lanier's crutch. A moment afterward, she could hear it slowly coming down the stairs.

As a matter of course, she had looked to see him changed, coarsened perhaps. The change was there, but not the coarseness. Rather than that, his body seemed to have fallen away, leaving his spiritual self, appealing and infinitely sad, plainly visible to her pitying eyes. Nevertheless, his first words surprised her by their crude baldness.

It was a moment, though, before he spoke, a moment when, once he was settled in his old place with his foot stretched out before him, the two of them rested face to face, their eyes searching, in so far as might be, each the other's heart. Then Lanier spoke.

"I am glad to find you here," he said. "It is the way I had dreamed of finding you, waiting. Dorcas, I need your help more than ever. I have missed it, these last days."

Under the steady scrutiny of his sad eyes, her own eyes faltered and fell away.

"If I only thought it was a help!" she said unsteadily.

"Help!" He spoke with a sudden fire, which belied his hopeless eyes. "Without you beside me, Dorcas, I should go to the devil within six weeks."

Something, perhaps in his tone, perhaps in the rough words themselves, something stung her into hasty, haughty retort.

"If you are that sort of a man, Mr. Lanier, you probably would go in any case," she told him sharply.

His colour came, showing that her words had struck home, had hurt him more than she would have deemed possible.

"You don't understand me, Dorcas," he said, after a little pause. "I don't mean it in any conventional sense, not in the way the phrase is generally used. I mean it literally. The future is n't too uncertain. I need your help, your sup-

port. I want you to stand by me in this thing, to fight it down, if I can; to face it, if I must." He hesitated, shutting his teeth together, as if upon a bitter recollection, a yet more bitter fear. Then he added, and now his accent was pitiful in its appeal, although his red-brown eyes met her eyes a little bit defiantly, "And in a sense you owe it to me, owe me your help and, more, your pity for all that you, by accident, have done."

There was a pause, a long one. Meanwhile the fire, fresh-lighted, crackled gayly. Then, of a sudden, the crackling gave way before a long-drawn, unearthly shriek, as of an animal in pain, the shriek of the unseasoned wood before the scorching, searing flame. The shriek died to an intermittent sob, then sank to silence, and, in the silence, Dorcas could hear the throbbing of her nerves and heart. Then, —

"Yes," she assented at last very slowly. "Yes. In a sense, I owe it to you."

Before he went away to bed, that night, Lanier sent for Dorcas to come into the library. Already his manhood had asserted itself once more, already he was keenly ashamed of the weakness which had led him to hurl upon her woman's shoulders the burden of his own responsibility. He apologized with words, and voice, and with appealing eyes; and Dorcas who, until that moment, had felt no need of his apology, accepted it without apparent reservation. None the less, there was a reservation. One can regret spoken words; one never, never can unspeak them. Always their trail remains.

Still later, that same night, Coit stood upon the hearth-rug, gazing down upon his wife. In his face was perplexity and something like anxiety; but, back of it all and beyond it all, there was his love, quiet, but ineffable.

"Dorcas," he said; "I suppose you realize that, after this last affair, Lanier will have to go away from The Terraces."

"But why?" she asked him quickly, as she tossed aside her book.

His answer was a question.

"Is n't it becoming a little more than we, either of us, can bear?"

Gordon, across the room, glanced up at the question. Then he lowered his eyes to his evening paper, and sat rigid, waiting for her answer.

"Ought we not to bear it, Leonard?" she said gently, after a slight interval. "It has been hard, hard and — discouraging." And, at the little catch in her breath, Gordon frowned at the paragraph beneath his unseeing eyes. "Still, I scarcely think it will happen again."

"Not here, at any rate." Coit spoke briefly.

"But, Leonard," Dorcas rose and stood beside him, tall and slender, with her long, pale gown wound across her feet; "listen. Have we any right to let him go away just now?"

"Why not now, Dorcas? Now more than ever."

Laying her hand upon his arm, she looked up into his face with steadfast, true brown eyes.

"Now, when he is crippled and lonely, and half-maddened by the thought of all that has happened, these past days; when, without a friendly hand held out to help him, he may let himself go to almost any reckless length? What right have we to let him go away like that, when we are here to help him?"

If there was a pause, it was almost imperceptible. Then Coit said slowly, —

"Every right."

And, as the two words fell upon the silence, Gordon arose and went away out of the room.

Dorcas was heedless of his going.

"And you would send him away, Leonard?" she asked, with sudden quiet.

"I would."

"Out of his sister's home, the nearest thing to any real home he has?" As she spoke, Dorcas flung her quiet from her, stung to speech by her unsteady nerves which still were

quivering from the memory of her talk with Lanier, not half an hour before. "Out of this house, where his best friends ought to be, ready to stand by him, and fight for him and with him in his trouble?"

Coit laid a steadying hand upon her arm.

"But, Dorcas child —"

Impatiently she shook his hand away.

"Don't call me that, Leonard!" she said hotly. "It is n't just to me; it is n't true. My childhood was all ground out of me, before I left off pinafores. Besides, if I really were the child you think me, I would n't be standing here, urging you not to make a mistake that you may regret, some day."

"How regret it?" Coit made grave query, seeking by his quiet to lessen her excitement for which he was totally at a loss to account.

"As one always does regret mistakes," she answered, with a sudden dreariness, as she bethought herself of her own mistake, and of the part which it had played in Lanier's undoing.

For a little while, Coit was silent. Dorcas's mobile face showed him plainly that she was in some trouble which, for the hour, had come upon her nerves; but what was the nature of the trouble, not even her husband's loving eyes could fathom. It would have simplified the matter vastly, could he only have known that it came, as so often trouble does come to women, out of an exaggerated sense of her own responsibility.

"Dorcas," he said evenly at last; "I hate to oppose you in this thing. I appreciate all your loyalty, too, to the old tie that bound Lanier and me together. And yet, I can't feel that it is right for me to let him stop on here at The Terraces, after all that has been happening. In spite of hospitality, in spite of the old relation, I owe something to myself and Gordon, something even more to you."

She lifted her chin with the well-remembered gesture of defiance, and her voice rang clear.

"Please do not consider me in this thing, Leonard," she bade him haughtily.

"You are the one to be considered first of all, Dorcas," her husband told her gently. "Who else, besides my wife?"

She chose to disregard the question. Instead, —

"Then you would send him away, just when he needs us most?" she iterated.

"But does he need us?"

"Leonard, I think he does."

"I am very sorry," Coit returned, and Dorcas, listening, knew from his voice that he would be inflexible. "Nevertheless, it is best that he should go."

"And — if he goes to ruin?"

"Then — he must go."

"Leonard!" Turning, she walked the length of the room, her hands clasped tightly behind her. Then, turning sharply again, she faced him, her train wound closely about her feet and wrapping her slim figure in spiral folds of palest maize. "Oh, have you no mercy in you?" she urged sharply.

Coit bowed his head.

"Dorcas, I hope I have. And yet, I must be just. Believe me, Dorcas, justice to us all is the thing that makes me so seemingly merciless to him."

Again she spoke out hotly, regardless of the increasing pallor of his face where the deep lines seemed to have carved themselves since the beginning of their talk.

"We need no justice, as he needs the mercy."

"But why?"

"Leonard," her clasped hands fell across the front breadths of her gown, breaking the sweeping folds into little shimmering creases that caught and flung back the light around them; "Leonard, do you ever think of the temptation such a —" she hesitated and then chose Pater's word; "such a curse must be?"

He shook his head.

"Dorcas, it is unthinkable to me," he told her simply.

"Then," and this time, the first time in her married life, he heard her voice ring hard with anger; "then no wonder you are merciless, a man of stone, not flesh and blood!" She turned upon him sharply, as she hurled full in his face her final question. "Is it that you never, never sin?" she demanded sternly. "Or are you a sinless demigod?"

The next instant, the hissing folds of her long, pale gown had vanished from the room, leaving Coit standing there alone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OF Dorcas's angry words, the sting yielded to the healing quiet of the night, but the gash remained. The only cicatrix she might have been able to apply was quite unthinkable to her. Lanier, in his weakness, might employ methods which she, in her strength, would scorn; Dorcas Coit would never shunt the consequences of her sins by crying off on the score of her own accountability. She could no more have confessed to Coit that her hot words, that night, had come, not from her girlish, loyal heart, but from her shaken nerves, nerves shaken by the scenes whose repetition he was trying his best to forestall, than she could have stabbed Lanier in the back, and then offered the knife to her husband as a souvenir of the occasion. Alone in her dressing-room, that night, she went over the scene, magnifying it and adding to it a thousand horrors. Most of the horrors were product of her quivering nerves, now doubly shaken. The worst one of them all, however, was actual: the fact that, being herself, Dorcas Sloane Coit, she could offer to her husband no adequate apology which should receive the sanction of her downright sense of honour. There in her room, with Buddha's eyes upon her, she faced the unalterable, ugly fact that she had hurt the man she loved for the sake of the one she merely pitied.

"And, worst of all, Buddha," she said aloud at last, as she arose and rang for her maid to come and let down her hair; "the harm is done. If I try to go to work to undo it, I shall only make a bad matter worse."

Coit, meanwhile, left alone, went away in search of Gordon. They sat together, smoking in utter silence, until the

clock struck one; but, even then, as they clasped their hands together in good night, they neither one of them uttered a single word. A moment later, Coit, passing along the hall outside his wife's door, heard the low, explanatory murmur of her voice, and he slowed his step to listen. Then he went on, and into his own dressing-room, where he flung himself upon the nearest chair. His face was overcast, almost a little sullen. For the hour, impossible as it might seem, the man was acutely jealous of the smiling broadcloth beast who had been destined to win the fullest confidence of his young wife.

Next morning at breakfast, both Coit and Dorcas were a shade too insistently, too eagerly polite in their attentions to each other and to Gordon. Gordon, on his side, absorbed his breakfast as if he were stoking for physical effort. Then he excused himself and vanished from the room, anxious to make escape before he broke his self-imposed vow of silence. Caring loyally for Dorcas, his sympathy was yet all for his father, whose point of view he shared completely. His affection for Lanier only increased his sense of impending danger, or, at least, of discomfort for them all, because, in his admiration for the best in his uncle, he inclined to exaggerate the attraction he might have for a girl like Dorcas. In his ignorance of some of the scenes between them, Gordon had gained no notion that Dorcas's latest and most lasting attitude to Lanier held in it all the germs of scorn, not for his weakness in the face of his temptation, but for that other weakness which had led him to cry off from his own accountability. And the pity that is akin to love must hold no taint of scorn.

Quite as usual, Dorcas chattered to her husband, as she drove him to his business. She totally ignored their talk of the preceding night, totally ignored the fact that she had met him, directly after breakfast, coming out from Lanier's room, his face flushed and his white head held aggressively upright. Instead, she talked about the weather, and about

the Braithwaites, whose oldest boy, Gordon reported, had dropped out of his freshman year in college and gone into a down-town shop as salesman. Eyes, Rica had called it, when she had told Gordon; but Dorcas doubted.

"I think perhaps," she added casually, as she left Coit before his office door; "I'll stop a minute to see Rica, as I go back home. I can't, though," she frowned thoughtfully; "because I've only time to leave the horses and get a muff, before I'm due at the dentist's."

Nevertheless, she did make time to see Rica, that same morning. She listened to the fable of the overworked eyes, and offered grave sympathy and suggestion and encouragement. That done, she veered sharply about to the subject uppermost in her mind.

"Rica," she said abruptly; "Mr. Lanier is leaving The Terraces."

"So soon?" Surprise was not the only emotion written on Rica Braithwaite's face. "Is he able?"

"No," Dorcas answered flatly. "He's not. The foot is still in plaster, and the doctor wants it to be kept up from the floor. He's not fit to take the journey."

Rica asked the wholly obvious question, although, knowing Coit, she had her own suspicions concerning the reply.

"Then why does he go?" she queried.

"He says," Dorcas accented the verb ever so slightly; "that it's time he was back again in New York."

Rica gazed at her steadily for a moment. Then, —

"You generally can tell by a person's looks when he is fibbing, Dorcas," she observed. "Do you think Duncan is telling the truth?"

"I've not seen him. Leonard told me," Dorcas evaded; but her sudden blush gave the lie to her evasion.

"I see." And Rica did see perfectly. Moreover, Dorcas was uncomfortably aware that Rica saw. After an instant, Rica spoke again. "It seems rather too bad for him to go away just now, when a little injury can do him so much

lasting harm," she said thoughtfully. Then she changed the subject as abruptly as Dorcas had done before her. "Did you know that Betty is going to New York?"

"Betty?"

"Yes, with Dickie. He wants to have her spend a few weeks down there with Bertha. As it happens, the two girls have n't met since they played dolls together. When the home was broken up, Dickie and Bertha went to different relatives, and Bertha drifted out of our sight, though we used to see Dickie often," Rica made voluble explanation.

"But so early in the season, and when she has been out only such a little while —" Dorcas left her phrase unfinished.

Rica merely smiled.

"I know," she said. "It does seem a bit strange, when you stop to think of it. However, girls nowadays are n't like what I used to be. Betty has set her heart on the plan; and, after all, one has n't so many cousins. Must you go?"

And Dorcas went her way, thoughtful. In her mute, inglorious self-communings in the dental chair, she went over and over again her talk with Rica. And it was Rica herself who had just said that you generally could tell by a person's looks when he was fibbing. Nevertheless, Rica's smile had been impenetrable. Dorcas longed acutely to get hold of Dickie. He at least would tell her what this new plan must mean. Unhappily for Dorcas, when at last she did get hold of Dickie, he was destined to tell her, not only the meaning of the plan, but certain home truths as well, truths that were far less welcome.

Dorcas was lunching out, that day; and, from the luncheon, she went on to a card party which ended in a tea. Accordingly, it was well on towards dinner time when she once more came inside The Terraces. Wier met her on the threshold. Would she please speak to Mr. Lanier in the library?

She found Lanier, for the first time since his accident, dressed for the street. Beside him on a chair, his hat and

overcoat lay above his crutch, and an apology for a shoe was on his injured foot. He wasted no time in conventional beginnings.

"As you know, I must be off, to-night," he told her, with the easiest grace he could.

Dorcas's fingers shook a little, as she slowly unfastened her long fur coat.

"I am very sorry," she said simply.

He drew a short breath.

"I — hoped you would be. I am sorry, too. Still, I can see it's the only thing to do. Coit is quite right, even if he is a little ungente in the way he goes about it."

She flung up her head sharply.

"Mr. Lanier! Please remember that you are speaking of my husband," she bade him, and her young voice was full of haughty dignity.

Her dignity collapsed at once, however, before the contriteness of his swift apology.

"Forgive me, Dorcas. I am totally wrong. The fact is, I am hurt and sore about it all, and desperately frightened at the thought of setting sail without my anchor."

"But —"

He interrupted.

"However, my anchor chain may be longer than we are aware. In any case, I shall count on it to steady me. God knows I need its steadying, Dorcas. There are things that one can't put through, all alone."

"I did," she told him tersely, for the wave of her antagonism had not yet wholly spent itself by any means.

"You, yes. But you are unusual," he made slow reply.

"Not in the least. I am much more normal than —" *You are* she was about to add; but, in mercy, she stayed her speech. For the time being, the man was down and out, so why proceed to flay him?

Instead, she stood there, watching him in silence, while within her warred the alternating currents of attraction and

repulsion. Had it not been for his one damning weakness, a weakness which, starting at the vulnerable point, was slowly spreading over all the tissue of his moral fibre, relaxing it and corrupting; had it not been for this one source of harm, Lanier would have been close to touching the edge of her ideals. His very weakness, had it showed itself broadly in his temperament, but not in paltry sinning, would have made him only so much the more lovable. Even now, at times, he offered a curious appeal to the inherent motherhood within her; not, though, to the womanhood she gave to Coit as his wife. That was stronger; it accepted protection, not poured it out, spattering, at another's feet. Coit in his strength she loved past all gainsaying. At best, she would give a pitiful affection to Lanier. The one was man, strong, virile and resourceful; the other a diseased and wailing child.

Nevertheless, as once before had happened in her life, because her task was going bad upon her hands, she would not give it up before the very end. Besides, was it going bad? If influence counted for anything, if one's responsibilities lapped over on one's neighbours, then her sturdy effort to brace Lanier up to the best standards of his innate self must count for something. Rules work both ways. Lanier himself had held her in part answerable for his last fall. Surely, her influence for good ought to be quite as strong as was her influence for harm. And her efforts for Lanier's regeneration had lasted for such a little while. If she let go now, no one could foretell what might happen. If she held on — She shut her hands hard upon the yielding edges of her soft fur coat, then half-smiled as she bethought herself how typical of the whole situation was her action — if she held on, tight and hard and steadily, if she put forth all her lifting strength, there would be bound to be some good reaction. Conservation of all energy would account for that; such primal laws must have their spiritual counterparts.

As for the pettishness of his resentment against Coit, that was a part of the great whole, the fretful outcry of the

wailing child. She could afford to disregard it, just as the mother disregards the beating little fists of her year-old baby. Its very ineffectiveness rendered it so much the more pitiful.

Well? She straightened up her shoulders, as she tossed aside the burden of her heavy coat. Should she hold on, or let go? Her brows straightened, as her shoulders had done. She would hold on. At worst, it could do no harm, save for the weariness to herself. At best, it might do some little good. In any case, it never had been her habit to funk an issue, once the end, however dubious, lay within her sight. Better play out a losing game and accept defeat with a laugh, than petulantly fling down the cards, face up, and, rising, leave the table. She smiled a little, as she recalled the last days she had worked upon her novel, although, at the time, it had been no smiling matter. Perhaps the parallel was the more perfect on that account.

And her husband? Her shoulders relaxed a little. Then proudly she straightened them again. Leonard was a gentleman, and just. She could count upon his honour. But, unhappily, no woman living could count upon his intense and fiercely virile love.

And, meanwhile, Lanier, half-sitting, half-lying on his couch, stared up at her with thoughtful eyes. Never had the girl seemed so beautiful to him as then, never so strong, so helpful in her fearless, girlish strength. Weak as he knew himself to be, it yet seemed to him, as he gazed at her, that, had Fate only permitted her to walk along beside him, he might have moved steadily to any goal he chose. At the thought, something stirred within him, moving him, shaking him completely, something which he had supposed was for ever dead. Instead, it had lain sleeping all these years; and now Dorcas Coit had wakened it. He withdrew his steady gaze, lest Dorcas should see the sudden flare which had leaped up in his red-brown eyes, see it and — Did he really wish that she should answer it?

To cover his inward excitement, he spoke again. Considering all things, his voice was singularly level, matter-of-fact.

"I waited to say good bye to you, you see," he told her. "After all you have done for me, I could n't well go away without so much as that."

"But really," and Dorcas's voice was by no means so level; "I have done so little; not nearly all that I had hoped to do, and — hope."

It was impossible for Lanier to ignore her stress upon the word.

"Hope?"

"Our compact," she reminded him. "At least," she added, with a smile of explanation; "our defensive alliance." Then, for this time she saw his eyes, and the light in them frightened her, although, asked, she could have given no name to the cause of her vague alarms, "Won't this waiting make you very late in getting to New York?" she asked, with a tardy attention to the practical details of her guest's exit.

"I'm not going to New York; at least, not now," he answered quietly.

"I thought — " Quickly she caught herself up, and asked instead, "Where then?"

"Rica telephoned to me, this noon. You had just gone out to luncheon," he explained. "She has asked me to go over there."

"Rica?"

"Yes, for the present. I may stay only a week or two, may stay on indefinitely. It all depends."

"On Rica's hospitality?" she asked. "We all know that is boundless."

"More boundless than her power to exercise it," he replied. "However, there lies the crux of the whole situation."

"You mean?" Dorcas spoke more easily. She liked Lanier far better when he talked of Rica; he was more manly then, more sympathetic for the interests of others than he had

shown himself of late. She had become aware of his decadence most of all by his increasing egotism.

Now he answered quite bluntly, and the bluntness became him.

"I mean that I shall stay on there indefinitely, make it a sort of home, upon the sole condition that Rica allows me to pay well for my board. I am always fussy about trifles; just now, I need a vast amount of waiting on. I can afford it all perfectly well; but, on the other hand, she cannot afford to give it to me."

Dorcas nodded silently.

"I understand," she said at length. "It is nice of you to think about it. However, Rica will never allow you to be her paying guest."

"I think she will, if I insist. It will hurt her, of course; but the hurt will be chiefly hers; the gain will all go to the family. With Rica, that fact alone would make her bear the hurt without complaining."

Dorcas looked up sharply at his words. As she did so, she realized that the flare had all died out from his eyes, leaving them cold and stern.

"You think it is as bad as that?" she queried. "Poor Rica!"

"I know," he told her crisply. "What else does it all mean: the sending off the servants, the selling the horses, the taking Billy out of college? Did you know," he hurled the question at her as he might have hurled a weapon; "know that Betty left, this morning, for New York?"

"This morning?" In her surprise, Dorcas attacked the minor issue, and the inversion irritated Lanier.

"This morning," he echoed, and his voice rasped on the words more than their simple meaning seemed to justify.

"Rica told me she was going. She's going to visit Dickie's sister."

"Visit!" The rasping hardness turned to cutting sarcasm. "A girl at the beginning of her first season! And you know

the social whirl in which Dickie and his sister probably live!"

Dorcas bowed her head. She did know. Who better?

"What then?" she asked a little faintly, for it was no easy lesson for her self-reliant trust in her own acumen to find out that this man, this weakling whom she had viewed with more than a slight edge of scorn, had been before her in his sympathetic grasp of the Braithwaites' falling fortunes.

His answer came sternly. The sternness was not directed towards herself, however; but rather towards the existing facts, and towards the man who had called those facts into being. And Dorcas, listening, laid that blame at the doors of Arnold Braithwaite.

"Betty," Lanier said; "has gone down to New York with Dickie for the simple sake of earning her own living."

"What!"

"Exactly," he said bitterly. "That is the remark I made, when the truth dawned upon me."

"Did Rica tell you?" Dorcas demanded.

"Does Rica ever tell things; at least, unpleasant things of that sort?" Lanier retorted. "No; I ferreted out the truth of that, as I have done with some other things, during my leisure hours of lying here flat on my back."

"But you think you know it?" she questioned slowly, as the pity of it all surged up across her mind. Poor Rica! And poor, poor, plucky Betty! Did ever another pretty girl come out, as the phrase is, into a world so pitilessly hostile?

"I know I know it," Lanier was insisting. "In a case like this, one has no business just to think. He must know, or else keep still." And again the virile note rang hard in his voice. "Besides," he added, after a moment more; "if you need further confirmation, I can give it to you. I called up Braithwaite himself just now, and he admitted the truth of my hypothesis."

"He did? Then that settles it." Dorcas spoke hopelessly.

"What will Betty do down there?" she asked, after a little interval of staring at the coals before her.

"Anything, she says, that's honest, and that will support herself and give her a few dollars over, to send home."

Dorcas's fingers began tapping the mahogany chair arm.

"At least, she's optimistic," she observed. Then, as the pity of it all came back upon her, she ceased her tapping and clenched her hands around the wood. "Mr. Lanier, do you mean to tell me that that pretty child is going into that great city to find work, work for which she is no more fitted than she is for digging in a mine?" she demanded, heedless of the few short months which parted her present self from just such another girl who had started upon just such another brave attempt.

"I do." Lanier's tone was grave.

"But — it's suicidal!" Dorcas asserted hotly.

Lanier's voice went down, by a whole octave.

"It may be infinitely worse," he told her slowly.

But, this time, Dorcas failed to grasp his meaning.

Instead, after a little, she assailed another corner of the selfsame subject.

"I could flay her father," she burst out viciously.

"Arnold? But why?" Lanier stared across at her in manifest surprise.

"Is n't he the cause of the whole trouble?"

"I can't see why."

"It's a man's place to support his family," she made swift explanation.

"If he can't?"

"But he can. Surely, you don't accept Rica's fable of his failing health?" Dorcas demanded, in hot scorn.

Lanier parried, with a question.

"When have you seen Braithwaite?" he asked.

"Three days ago."

"Well?"

Dorcas answered the monosyllable with some impatience.

"He's atrophied, I admit. He is nothing but a faded, shabby shadow of his old self; but it's all his own fault."

"How?"

"In his place, I'd get up and go to work," she retorted.

"Work is n't always to be found, not work that Braithwaite could do."

Dorcas rose and fell to pacing the floor.

"I'd shovel gravel for the roads, before I'd sit down and let my wife support me," she said, while her hands, shut behind her, crumpled her gown into ugly little folds which partially revealed her slim, boyish figure, now quivering with suppressed indignation. "Yes, I mean *support*," she added. "Listen, Mr. Lanier. I had n't meant to tell you, had n't meant to speak of it to any living man. In fact," her short laugh was wholly nervous; "I think I would n't have dared to tell many men, for fear they would rise up and tear Arnold Braithwaite limb from limb, the lazy, inefficient creature that he is." With an effort, she controlled herself and spoke more calmly. "It came out, to-day at luncheon, that Rica Braithwaite has written notes to several of her old friends, asking if she may not bake their cakes in future, or even make their bread. And that, from a woman such as Rica Braithwaite!" She paused in her restless tramp about the room. "It's heart-rending," she added slowly. "It's the sort of thing that mingles gooseflesh with one's tears." And then, after a moment more, she added, "I wonder why it was that she did n't ask me, too."

Lanier thought he knew. He also thought that his own strength was greater than in the end it proved to be, and so he held his peace. Instead, —

"Poor little Rica!" he repeated, and his voice was pitiful.

Something in its pity stung Dorcas into fresh indignation against Braithwaite.

"You pity her, and yet you refuse to blame the man who has brought it all upon her," she retorted.

"No." And Lanier's tone held a new cadence, hard, unyielding and very full of scorn. "I think he is unforgivable."

But Dorcas tried to argue.

"But you say you think he can't get things to do, things compatible with his dignity," she reminded Lanier sarcastically.

Her sarcasm drove Lanier from the point he had so nearly touched. Instead, —

"Not his dignity, Dorcas. Braithwaite would take any sort of work that was offered him," he contradicted. "Of course, a man brought up as he has been, has n't the strength to make a successful navvy. For the rest, he has no real profession. He came out of college to go into that same office where he stayed, to sit down in the chair from which he only moved to make way for Gordon —"

"You speak as if poor old Gordon drove him out," she interrupted sharply.

"Not Gordon." Lanier spoke deliberately, and then he let the pause lengthen into a silence. At last, however, when he saw that Dorcas did not mean to break the silence, he went on, "Braithwaite knows just one thing and knows it well. He has no sort of fitness for entering into some other line. Moreover, he is prematurely old; he looks a man of over sixty. A man of sixty can knock for ever at the doors of business, and they'll never open without a pull from the other side."

Dorcas dropped down into her former place before the fire, and fell into apparent study of her foot, as it rested on the low rail of the fender.

"What I can't understand," she said quite thoughtfully at last; "is how a man like Arnold Braithwaite, knowing all this, knowing he was prematurely old and that he never had laid up a single penny of his income: how he ever was foolish enough to let go the place he held. I'm not sure but I'd as soon be inefficient as a total dunce."

Lanier started to speak, held his peace, started again, and

again checked himself. For a little time, he remained there silent, his eyes roving over the figure seated there beside him, roving from the slender shoe-tip to the burnished coils of hair and back again. Slowly, as he watched her, his face lighted; the fire came back into his red-brown eyes. Then, as he realized the total aloofness of her mood from his, his face hardened slightly, although the fire remained. He waited just a little longer, to see whether she would become aware of his existence, of his presence, of the approaching hour for his departure. When at last it became evident to him that she had lost all consciousness of him in her greater interest in the Braithwaites, he spoke again, this time with a curious, slow insistence.

"Braithwaite did not let the place go, of his own free will," he said. "He was forced out of it, forced to give it up by a man who knew that, giving it, he was also likely to be giving up his bread and butter."

"Who could — " Dorcas was beginning sharply. But, —

"Uncle Duncan," Gordon's voice came ringing in to them from the hall outside; "what's all this nonsense that I hear about your going to leave us?"

A moment later, Gordon came striding into the room. His voluble regrets faltered, however, and fell away from his tongue, unspoken, when his quick eyes discovered the flush on Dorcas's cheeks, the little weary gesture with which Lanier was settling back upon the cushions. Long afterward, in talking about that hour with Dorcas, Gordon came to learn that perchance the little weariness had come, as comes reaction to one suddenly delivered from temptation. For the moment, however, he laid it to a cause which was by far less noble.



CHAPTER TWENTY

WINTER passed slowly onward into spring; and a spring, not balmy in the least, but raw and cold, lay on the little city. To Rica Braithwaite, smiling and still apparently quite indomitable, the spring seemed typical of her present existence. Betty gone, her husband fast turning to a derelict upon life's sea, Rica was very lonely in those latter days. To be sure, Lanier was living in the house, and Rica had known and liked Lanier for what was practically always. Nevertheless, she could not well discuss with him her personal concerns, ask his advice whether it would be better economy to stay on in the great house they owned, or be at the expense of moving into smaller quarters. Indeed, in all the circle of her friends, there was but one person whom Rica Braithwaite could conceive consulting in matters such as that. That one was Dorcas Coit, and chiefly because Rica long since had proved that Dorcas could listen, and doubt, and yet hold her peace. But Dorcas, unhappily for Rica, had been carried off by her husband for a southern trip which would last for weeks. Rica, accordingly, could only go on, smiling impenetrably. It marked a new phase in the misfortunes huddling fast around her that she could contemplate the possibility of doing anything else.

Meanwhile, Lanier's departure had brought back to The Terraces somewhat of its old atmosphere. Freed from the constant disturbance of his presence, Dorcas's nerves swiftly readjusted themselves to their normal poise. Her momentary antagonism towards her husband, in any case, had been a thing of petulance, not of actual conviction. Rather than

that, Dorcas, watching him from day to day, was gradually taking it as the first article of her new creed that the King could do no wrong. Had she ever had her doubts, the promptness of Coit's forgiveness for her little outbreak, the way he set himself to work to annul her memory of it: these alone would have set her doubts to rest. The honeymoon was sliding backward to take its place among their memories; the glamour of their unfamiliar life together was yielding to the steady light of perfect familiarity. But, as the weeks and months went by them, Dorcas was finding Coit daily more considerate and gentle, daily more generous in his attitude to her, daily more loving.

Perhaps it was only because daily his love increased, that every now and then Coit was finding its lustrous surface flecked with a sudden doubt. He had supposed himself to be marrying an impetuous and downright child, a child who, granted the proper tact in handling her immaturity, would yield up her ideals in favour of his own. Instead of that, as he had found out, months before, his wife was all a woman, perhaps a little immature, yet as far removed from childhood as the gold of noon is from the rose of dawn. Tact in handling her would surely play its part, but only when the tact was mixed with good, sound logic. His earliest hopes concerning Dorcas had been that in time she would adore him. Now his greatest hope was that he might gain and hold her full approval. The toy he had chosen for himself had turned into a judge, and Coit was slowly coming to rely upon the judgment, even as concerned himself; quite without his knowledge, his moral fibre stiffened, as he felt it coming forward for inspection. One look of disappointment in the clear brown eyes of Dorcas would have outweighed, for him, the disapproving gaze of half his other world.

The thrust of Dorcas, in her anger, had carried home. Now, weeks afterward, the slow red arose across his cheeks, as he bethought him of her scornful question, "Are you a sinless demigod?" In all truth, no. What man is? And

yet, there were in Coit's life singularly few chapters which he would have censored, before he gave the open book to Dorcas. He had set out to be just and cleanly. So far as he knew, he had succeeded in both aims. Of his inflexibility, of the sternness of his judgments, Coit took no heed. Even had he heeded, he would have set them down to the account of justice. Right, to his mind, was always right, whatever its effect on other, lesser men who came in conflict with his standard.

His own attitude towards Lanier he accepted, without question, as being the only one possible for his adoption. Temptation such as Duncan Lanier's, such weakness: these were unthinkable to Leonard Coit. Had he been given appetites so harmful, he would have closed his lips and gone his way, and thought no more about it. From the earliest days of Coit's first marriage, Lanier's taint had lain upon his home, embittering his life less by the shame caused by Lanier's excesses than by the intense mortification of being forced to sit by, silent, and listen to the altercations between his wife and his wife's brother, to her bitter accusations and to the yet more bitter sarcasm of Lanier's reply.

Lanier had told the truth in his complaint to Dorcas, a truth which Coit would have been the first one to admit, even while he deplored the weakness which had given it utterance. Lanier's sister might have helped him, if she would. Instead of that, alternately she treated him as an acute source of disgust and shame, or else washed her hands of him absolutely. True, it was a maddening factor in her social life, this total uncertainty whether her brother would show himself as a gentleman, or as a sot; or hold himself aloof from her completely, for months on months on end. Nevertheless, she could have bettered the situation, and, at the same time, have bettered him. Instead of doing either one for any length of time, she died.

Afterwards, justly and not too gently, Coit had had it out with Lanier. In this, Coit had been somewhat justified by

the condition in which Lanier presented himself at his sister's funeral. A man like Coit never could have conceived that Lanier's alcoholic and exceeding cheeriness, that day, had had its source in honest mourning for the death of his only relative, the sister to whom he had been nothing but a thing of scorn.

From that time on, Lanier only went every now and then to The Terraces which aforetime had been to all intents and purposes his home. He made no bones of saying that he went there only on account of Gordon, of whom he was extremely fond. Coit accepted the explanation, and always accorded him a courteous welcome, as impersonal as it was perfunctory. Between the visits, however, he took occasion to probe the depths of the intimacy between his young son and his erratic brother-in-law, and to apply the needful moral antiseptics.

Just such antiseptics, now, he felt he must apply to the mind and heart of Dorcas. It was not that, in reality, he was jealous of Lanier. Dorcas was too sane, too clean of mind to make such jealousy quite thinkable. Indeed, down in his secret heart, Coit would have told himself that his one great jealousy concerned the smiling Buddha, the broadcloth brute to whom Dorcas confided all her secrets, to whom, for anything he knew, perchance she made her orisons. When he longed so acutely to know the inmost convictions of his wife, yet scorned to ask them, it was maddening to be aware that, a half-hour later, she would pour them forth into the gray cloth ears of that infernal elephant. As for Lanier —

At this point in his musings, a point he reached again and again, that winter, Coit usually frowned and lighted a fresh cigar.

Dorcas was far too strong, as he was daily finding out, to be really influenced by such a man as Lanier, pitiful weakling that he was. But her nerves were bound to yield to the constant wear and tear of Lanier's presence; under his insistent appeal for sympathy and understanding, an appeal quite as

insistent because, as Coit still believed, it was tacit, Dorcas could not fail to lose somewhat of her gay, girlish poise. And it was that same girlish gayety which had first attracted Coit, that same youthful assumption of self-reliance and indomitable pluck. Later, once the tension of her New York life had relaxed a little, the same poise had reappeared, more charming, even, in the mistress of The Terraces than it had been in the little college girl, ignorant and cocksure as only college girls can be. But now, from the influence of Lanier, or from some other cause, the poise was intermittent. Even granted that her occasional irritability had had no deeper source than girlish nerves, the time had been when such yielding to her nerves would have been inconceivable to Dorcas. Coit drew a long breath. Such things must have a cause. Eliminating the possible influence of Lanier upon the girl, no other cause remained. He shook his head. Was it possible that, in his stern judgment of the case, in his total noncomprehension of a weakness like Lanier's, he might have underestimated any influence that Lanier had gained over Dorcas? In any case, great or small the influence, it was an unwelcome thought to Coit, to any man worthy of the name, that such a sway should be exerted on his wife.

And if Dorcas responded? Or, in time, should ever respond?

Coit's eyes blazed with a new, fierce light. Lanier had been there at The Terraces quite long enough. He should leave the house, next day.

Lanier did leave the house, next day. However, the evening intervened. It sent Coit in search of the tacit sympathy of Gordon. Later, it sent him off to bed, wondering for a second time whether he possibly had underestimated the influence a man such as Lanier could have. On his way, he heard Dorcas communing audibly with Buddha. His wonderings were scattered by his furious wish to wring the elephantine neck; but, in his own room, they returned upon him — and remained.

Next day, even, they increased a little. It seemed to him

less like the hand of Providence than the hand of Dorcas who had pulled the wires for Lanier's removal to the Braithwaites'. Dorcas, questioned carelessly, answered with equal carelessness. In the days to come, her intimacy with Rica Braithwaite became neither more nor less. She went there no oftener than before, but just as often. And so the days departed, but Coit's vague wonderings did not depart with them.

Nevertheless, Lanier vanished from The Terraces, both Coit and his wife, asked, would have confessed that they found it good to settle back into their old domestic rut, good to be freed from the consciousness of any alien presence in the house. Coit's rejoicings were wholly personal, perchance a little selfish. Those of Dorcas allied themselves with the feeling of the child dismissed from school; it was a relief to be removed a little from the scene of her responsibilities. Now that she lacked the stinging spur of Lanier's presence, the task of his regeneration seemed to her unduly heavy. Not that her courage flagged, nor yet that she consciously drew back from the outworking of her promise. It was merely that the physical remoteness of her working field made as well for a moral distance. The indigenous heathen at one's elbow is always a more potent figure than the heathen in far-off Africa; his moral rags are so much less picturesque that one makes all the greater haste to mend them.

As far as Dorcas was concerned, Coit was much wiser than he knew, when he planned for their southern trip. His own idea had been to carry her quite away with him for a little while, so that, free from the claims of social life, she might become more than ever conscious of his enwrapping love. For that, however, there was no need for isolation. Dorcas already had learned that lesson all by heart. Her social life no more touched her love for Coit than the brown burr of the chestnut touches the pale, sweet meat within. Coit stood out the more strongly individual to her, by reason of the social husk enfolding them.

But Lanier, who might perchance have eaten his way inside, was relegated to remote spaces by their journey. For the time being, other interests crowded him from Dorcas's mind completely. With the unconscious egotism which regarded all unfamiliar phases of life as being exhibits, arranged for her sole benefit, ceasing when she left them, Dorcas quite forgot to remember that Lanier, in all those weeks when, hand in hand with her husband, she was wandering under sunny skies; that Lanier, in the ice-bound North, was still struggling with his natal curse, downing it and being downed by turns. Twice only the memory of it all came back to her: once when a letter came from Rica Braithwaite, once when she had been reading a forlorn little note which Lanier had sent her, out of one of his blackest moods. The letter she saved to show to Coit; she burned the note, however. Her woman's eyes read into it a cryptic message of sincerity which made her shrink from the look of quiet scorn its poor, futile little phrases could not fail to bring across the face of Coit. And Coit was infinitely more cunning than he ever was aware, when he arranged to break the lazy quiet of their journey by a cross-country motor trip, next day. However, the languor of the fragrant, sunny, idle South was stealing across even his stalwart nature. It gave him greater tolerance in all things, even in his judgment of such men as Duncan Lanier; it made him cling more closely to his old ideals of Dorcas, of the child wife whom he cherished as a thing apart from all suspicion, all distrust; above all, from wonderings which held within themselves the potential germs of blame.

It was not until two days after their return that Coit's valet, who was an Austrian and had the vices of the serpent without any of its wisdom, mentioned to Coit that Dorcas's maid had told him about seeing the crisping ashes of a note, ashes across whose curly, blackened surface Lanier's name shone forth, as if traced there by a fiery reed. Under his snow-white hair, Coit's face, that night at dinner, looked dull gray and strangely wan. The wonderings had all come

back upon him, and, in their train, there had come a crowd of sinister little doubts, ugly, and yet too petty to be greeted with anything but stoic, scornful unconcern.

Meanwhile, three months had passed away since Duncan Lanier had taken up his abode in the Braithwaite home, and now the abode seemed bidding fair to become permanent. The location suited him, and the great, stately house. Always he had liked Rica. Now, in this closer relation, his admiration for her was becoming well-nigh boundless. Moreover, she made him singularly comfortable, combining in a rare degree the luxury of home and the leaving him to go his independent way. And, for full three quarters of that time, Lanier's independent way had been an exceedingly steady one.

Quite unconsciously Braithwaite had helped Lanier in this. The driftwood from another wreck often makes the safest sort of life-raft. For weeks at a time, Lanier was far too much absorbed in Arnold Braithwaite's slow disintegration to pay any especial attention to himself, or even to his appetites. How complete that disintegration was, only a constant inmate of the house could reckon. The signs of it were as perpetual as they were slight. Taken intermittently, they were almost negligible, the freaks of an idle, easy-going man. Taken together, they were convincing. And Arnold Braithwaite had been the show boy of the school, a boy who was the glory of his teachers' methods, of his parents' training; and, moreover, a boy who was the despair of every single one of his boy companions. His fitness for his prominence summed itself up in a terse superlative: he was too good. Apart from that, however, nothing ever ailed him. Unhappily, though, that way lies the path of futility, and, in time, of selfishness. Braithwaite himself would have been the first one to be surprised, if anybody had explained to him that, because he could not find place in any office, it was no especial reason that his wife should split the kindlings.

And split the kindlings now she actually did, for by now

the boys, one after another, had left school and were going early to their work. Lanier had come upon her, one bright March morning, a hatchet in her hand and her hair so ruffled by the wind as to assure him that she had by no means lately left the house. She had smiled back at him in remonstrance, when he took the hatchet from her; but, for the once, her usual brave excuse was lacking.

It was on that day, Rica remembered later, that the first ominous restlessness had showed itself in Lanier's manner. Happily for her, she had no notion what part in its cause had been played by the picture of herself, rising from above the little heap of kindling wood, to smile bravely up into Lanier's wrathful eyes.

For a week, the restlessness increased. Then, one morning, she failed to arouse Lanier in time for breakfast. Towards noon, fearing he might be ill, or worse, she thrust convention from her and opened his bedroom door. The worse thing confronted her; and it roused within her a sort of physical nausea. Quite gently, however, she shut the door again and went away; but she carried with her a half-empty bottle, and when she had sent the bottle crashing into her garbage pail, she went into the library and sat down, her hands across her eyes, to think.

Dorcas, with the warmth and charm of the sunshiny South still fresh upon her, came in and found her thinking. Within ten minutes, Dorcas was in full possession of the facts; but this was only because Rica's pride whispered in her ear that it was less ignoble to tell tales of Lanier than to allow the burden of her mood to rest unjustly on her husband. And Dorcas, listening, felt the glamour and the gladness of the South fall from her. Instead, there came surging back over her the sense of her own accountability, the recollection of the part which she had vowed herself to play in Lanier's regeneration. From that time onward till the end of all things, what was more, the memory never really, fully left her. Henceforward, every now and then, she would be

destined to stop short at the meeting of the roads, and weigh against each other her duty to Coit who loved her, and her duty to Lanier whom she might help to save. In the end, her New England ancestry determined the dipping of the scales, that and the bulldog grip upon her objects, gained from some remote Briton among her different forbears.

Together, once he was himself once more, she and Lanier talked it out. She found, in talking, that the weeks of their separation had seen the birth of a new manliness within him. Perchance the manhood, dying in the breast of Arnold Braithwaite, had transmigrated to Lanier's life, there to work out its salvation so far as the time was left for it. In any case, Lanier accepted the situation like a man, confessed his fault without seeking to lay it off upon some one else's shoulders; and, in simple, virile fashion, took counsel with Dorcas how best they could set to work to slay the beast itself, and then, as time went onward, slowly to efface its mark.

Needless to say that, in this new mood, Dorcas was conscious of the old charm, the old nameless attraction which had won her, during those early months of the preceding autumn — perhaps before. On that account, and without the slightest sense of running counter to Coit's desires, she saw Lanier often at the Braithwaites', she even asked him to The Terraces. Frequently the talk was personal, occasionally intimate, occasionally straying off upon discussions of the relative values of certain advertised cures, to end in mere details of chemistry and hygiene. It always finished, however, just at the spot where it began: Lanier's struggle, Dorcas's hope, for perfect cure.

And, six months before, Lanier would have assented with, —

"God willing!"

Now, though, he said tersely, —

"I'll do my level best."

And do his level best he did, even to the point of confessing to her all his early symptoms of approaching thirst, of taking

counsel with her how he might forestall them; even to the point, one April day, of walking in upon her as she sat alone at tea, and begging her to take away and hide the bottle in his hand. Dorcas, startled, shaken in every nerve by this strange appeal, yet gave one heedful glance at his livid face, his disordered hair, then rose and took the bottle from his outstretched, grasping hand. Unhappily for Dorcas and for all concerned, even then she trusted him too implicitly to bethink herself of looking back over her shoulder, while she went across the lawn to the stables and buried the bottle deep within a bin of slippery yellow grain.

Quite contrary to all his habits, Coit went to a Chamber of Commerce dinner, that same night, and Gordon was in New York. During the past three months, Gordon had taken on the custom of going down there often. He claimed that business called him; but, inasmuch as he did not leave his office until five and was back at ten, next morning, Dorcas decided that the business must be irregular of character, and quite subordinate to Gordon's increasing devotion to Dickie who never failed to dine with him at one or other of the great hotels where the Coits were known. Now and then, but by no means always, Gordon saw Betty Braithwaite. Dickie appeared to be the main object of his journey; and Dorcas, knowing them both, knowing alike their likeness and their points of difference, delighted in the friendship which was springing up between them.

She was thinking it all over, likeness and difference, on this particular evening while she sat alone before the fire, and her face showed that her thoughts were full of supreme content. After her short, exciting interview with Lanier, that afternoon, after the inevitable discouragement which had followed swiftly on the elation of knowing he had come to her for help, it was restful to her to let her thoughts slide away to two such glad young things as Gordon Coit and Dickie. She was idly picturing them as they still sat at dinner — the St. Regis, Gordon had told her that it was

to be, that night — when she was aroused by a footfall just behind her. She turned her head. Lanier stood in the open doorway, livid, dishevelled, despair in his brown eyes, but greedy longing written in the lines about his mouth.

In her surprise, Dorcas spoke out the question which first rose in her mind.

"Did Wier let you in — like that?" she asked a little sharply.

"He did n't need. I had my key." Lanier's voice was sullen. It was plain that, for the hour, the beast was uppermost.

"Your key?"

"This was my sister's house," he reminded her curtly. "I had my latchkey."

"Of course," Dorcas made swift assent, for all her instinct taught her that this was no time to show resentment. "Sit down," she added tardily, and with a hope that Lanier would refuse.

Her hope seemed about to be justified.

"I did n't come for that," he told her roughly; and, in a lesser crisis, she might even have rejoiced at the unwonted roughness of his voice, as in a sign of the new virility within him. Now, though, —

"What then?" she asked him.

"I came to get the bottle you took away from me, this afternoon."

"But you asked me to take it," she reminded him.

"No matter. I want it now."

For the space of half a minute, Dorcas hesitated. Then, as she saw the dull fires kindling in his red-brown eyes, she made decision.

"Impossible!" she said.

"But it's mine," he retorted, insistent as any child.

"Not now. You gave it to me." Dorcas rose, as she spoke, and stood facing him.

"But, if I want it back again — "

She cut his phrase in half, speaking quite steadily.

"You will not get it."

At her sharp refusal, Lanier seemed on the very point of whimpering, of showing himself the weakling she had hoped for ever dead. Then suddenly he stiffened himself and faced her, and his voice grew resonant and stern.

"Dorcas," he said; "it is my right. Unless you give me what I ask for, I shall —"

"Dorcas," from the doorway, Coit's voice broke in upon them coldly; "when you are at liberty again, you'll find me in the library." And, without a glance at Lanier, he strode away and left them, standing face to face with only the distance of a narrow rug between them.

A little later, Dorcas joined Coit in the library. She looked flushed; her breath came a bit short. Otherwise, there was nothing to mark her manner as unusual. On his side, Coit disdained to ask for explanation, just as, on hers, Dorcas disdained to offer it, unasked. And so the evening waned; and the darkness of the night increased the shadow. On his way to his own dressing-room, Coit heard the murmur of Dorcas's voice in hers. He thought that she was talking to Buddha, after her old fashion; but, instead, Dorcas, the self-reliant, was upon her knees, praying aloud for guidance.

Next morning, breakfast dragged perceptibly. Gordon's presence would have been a veritable Godsend; and even Wier appeared to them both a blessing, as he moved softly to and fro. For the first time in their short wedded life, pride meeting pride, Dorcas and Coit were showing themselves equally inflexible.

Nevertheless, when they left the table, quite in her usual fashion, Dorcas went up to her room to make ready for her early morning drive. As she stood beside the window, drawing on her gloves, by force of ancient habit, she lifted up her gaze to Buddha's friendly countenance. But her gaze fell away again at once. There were things in life, she was

finding out at last, too personal and far too sacred to be entrusted even to Buddha's broadcloth ears.

And so Dorcas's glance dropped back again, to rest inertly on the lawn below her, and her thin scarlet lips took on the pitiful droop of a discouraged, frightened child. All at once, it dawned upon her that life was large and full of mystery, far too large and far too full of mystery for her to grapple with it, single-handed and alone. With Coit's strong hand beside her own — And even in such a case as that of Lanier —

Suddenly she stiffened into attention. Lanier was crossing the lawn below her window, not striding across it as a kinsman and a guest should do, but skulking furtively, with many glances at the house. It took but an instant for Dorcas to divine his intention. An instant later, she was rushing down the stairs, on her way after him into the stable.

She found Lanier in the grain room, bending above an open bin whose slippery, sliding, slithering contents eluded the efforts of his pawing hands. So intent was he upon his futile burrowing that he started abruptly and then cowered, before the lashing scorn of her young, fearless voice.

"You here?" she asked him tersely. And then she added, "You coward! You sneak!"

With one hand clinging to the bin, he recommenced his futile pawing with the other, the while he peered at her with heavy, bloodshot eyes.

"It's mine," he told her querulously. "Where have you hidden it?"

"Where you will never find it, if you keep on that digging for a year and a day," she made undaunted answer, although the neck of the bottle was not ten inches from his finger ends. "What are you doing here?"

As sometimes happens in cases such as that, Lanier straightened himself and spoke with momentary dignity.

"I told you, last night," he said; "that I should come. I may break my word to you in other ways; but not in this. Dorcas, it is my right to ask you for this thing."

And once again, as on the night before, his words fell on the ears of Coit, now crossing the stable floor, with Gordon at his side.

Only Coit's ebbing colour showed that he had heard, however; or, hearing, heeded. His voice was quite steady, as he said to Dorcas, —

"Gordon came up on the first train with Dickie, to bring Betty home. Rica telephoned them, late last night. Arnold is very ill."

Once more Lanier had fallen to his ceaseless pawing; once more the golden grain was slipping and slithering from beneath his touch. He never once raised his head while Coit was speaking; but, once Coit paused, Dorcas heard his voice, muffled and indistinct from the surrounding bin, a voice insistent in its triumphant prophecy.

"And Arnold Braithwaite is going to die soon, very, very soon. Moreover, if he dies, you, with all your sanctity, will be known as being no better than his murderer."

To Coit, the words were nothing more than the inarticulate mumble of the drunken man Lanier showed himself to be. Dorcas, however, was standing closer to the bin. She heard each syllable quite plainly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

To Rica Braithwaite, sitting on guard beside her husband's bed, there was no doubt that now at last Arnold was ill, very, very ill. For months, pluckily and smiling, she had clung to the old, threadbare fable that consideration for his waning health had driven him to his resignation, had clung to it in the face of the universal knowledge that Braithwaite had alternately battered for admission on the doors of every corporation in the city, and unfolded before his friends assembled at the club all sorts of lustrous plans for establishing new corporations of his own.

The city was not large. It took only a small share of Braithwaite's time to make an occasional canvass of its possibilities for suitable employment, even to go down to New York, every now and then, or else across to Boston, to lay before his friends in either city his fitness for the work he sought so anxiously. The rest of his spare time, and it was nearly all spare time for him nowadays, he spent in planning out golden impossibilities, which turned to tarnished gilt, directly he laid them down in the light of another's judgment. In the final end, he gave it all up, all the seeking and the planning, and yielded himself completely to that dread Nirvana which Dorcas had so feared to attain.

A few people, looking on, said that Braithwaite was quite inexcusable; but they were mostly women, and idealists withal. The men knew better, the unsuccessful ones out of their very unsuccess, the others because their success had brought to their doors many and many a man just such as Arnold Braithwaite, men who needed and deserved the work

they could not gain. And even, taken as regarded themselves, what could they do in Braithwaite's case? Trained all his business life to the one thing, accustomed to think only in terms of electricity and dollars, prematurely old and looking vastly older, even, than he was by temperament: what could Arnold Braithwaite do? In opening new business, in taking new men into old positions, the need was for the young, the alert, the plastic. In starting out upon undertakings wholly new, experience in something alien was little better than a handicap. The crystals must be broken, before they could be formed anew, and on a different plane and plan. Moreover, a man as old as Braithwaite would shrink from the inevitable instructions which a boy, fresh out of college, would accept as his due meed and never think about resenting in the least. The cry of the business world was for the young man; and practical experience had justified the cry. The older men, discussing Braithwaite's case, accorded it full pity; but they gripped the arms of their own office chairs the tighter, while the discussion lasted.

Bit by bit, meanwhile, Braithwaite's ambition had turned to apathy. It is so much more easy to accept failure than success, because the failure lacks the spur which the success is bound to bring. One climbs up the rungs of success; but one sits down inertly on the heap of repeated failures. As the months wore on, Braithwaite stopped hunting for positions, stopped planning the new and brilliant openings which needed only just a little bit of borrowed capital to lead onward into fortune; he even stopped his worrying. Last of all and most ominous touch of all, he stopped his vague antagonism towards Gordon, his sarcastic references to the younger man's efficiency.

By Christmas, Braithwaite had shrunk to an old, old man who shuffled when he walked, who hunched himself sidewise in his chair, who either listened inertly to the talk around him, or else burst forth into sudden and shrill invective upon some minor point which, six months before, would

have seemed to him quite negligible. In fact, nowadays, it was only the very minor points which appeared to have the power to penetrate his lethargy. This rendered him irritable as concerned the daily drudgery of living; but left him passive in a real crisis.

There had been two or three such crises lately. Betty's going away from home had been the first one. The giving up of the boys' school had been others. The sending away the final maid had been the last one. Braithwaite had accepted the earlier ones quite passively; had assented to the need of them at once, and had left to Rica all expressions of regret. The departure of the maid, however, he took to himself as a personal affront of Fate, and he waxed quite testy, the first morning, when he discovered he must turn the heat on the bathroom for himself. It was a minor detail that Rica, down in the cold kitchen, was making up the fire for breakfast. Braithwaite, an hour later, accepted his breakfast sullenly, and wondered aloud whether Gordon Coit would ever come to eating hash.

To Rica's great relief, she was alone with him, that morning. The boys always took their breakfast early and in haste; it was her habit to serve a second and more leisurely meal for Lanier and her husband; and Lanier, as it chanced, was absent in New York. Rica, watching her husband's dull resentment at things in general, listening to his grumbling sarcasm, rejoiced that Lanier was out of the way. She rejoiced still more at her own acumen which had held her from explaining to her husband that Lanier was with them on the basis of a paying guest. The fact, she saw now, would have driven him to fury; not that he liked Lanier so well, for the friendship of the two men always had been rather passive, but because he still kept up the pretext that they were well-to-do, just as of old, in their more prosperous days, he had loved to live up to the general theory that they were very rich. In the midst of her rejoicings over Lanier's absence, Rica allowed herself to give a parenthetical sort of sigh.

The money which Braithwaite had flung away, each month, would have kept them all lavishly, according to their present standards, for a full year at least. However, it was some slight comfort to her that she had realized it, spoken of it, even, at the time; although the wildest sort of horses could never have dragged out of Rica Braithwaite's lips a marital *I told you so*. Her vows before the altar had forbidden that, just as they had forbidden her present disappointment in her husband's fibre to affect the quality of her old-time love for him. Rica Braithwaite was old-fashioned. She believed that judicial reasoning should come prior to love, not after.

And when, as occasionally happened, her eyes grew dim above her batter, and the cakes she was baking for her old-time guests to serve seemed vanishing into a fog, she rallied swiftly. After all, what mattered the rest of it, so long as Arnold's irritation never included her? While his love lasted, while for him she still was the one woman of the world, the rest counted for almost nothing. And so, smiling, she gathered up her courage and went on along a path thorny as any that ever stretched away before a mediaeval saint. Perchance, hers might be leading onward towards the selfsame goal.

Throughout the dreary winter, Rica had had two constant sources of cheer. Without a word of any sort spoken between them about the Braithwaites' dwindling fortunes, Dorcas Coit had come to range herself on Rica's side, steady, plucky, and bubbling over with practical plans of every kind. No sister ever was more loyal; no friend ever brought in more courage from the outer world. To Dorcas, there was nothing especially intentional in this. Rica was not her charge in any sense, as was Lanier. It was only that the girl was clear-sighted and kind, that she had come to care for Rica, to pity her far less than she admired her. No one year of superabundant luxury had been able to teach Dorcas Coit to forget her own narrow times; out of the memory came the belief that pity would be thrown away on Rica, bravely filling to the fullest limit the possibilities of her existence.

Success, in the downright, energetic young mind of Dorcas, measured itself solely by nearness of one's grasp on one's outmost limitations. The mere accumulation of ease, and leisure, or fame even, had no connection with the matter whatsoever. Where Dorcas could, she helped Rica; where she could do nothing, she was content to stand aside and watch her, rejoicing, the while, in the efficient way she helped herself.

"But, Leonard," she burst out impulsively, one night; "think what it must be to come to where your intellect tells you to despise your husband! You could n't despise him; but it would be shocking to realize that you would despise another man, standing in his place."

Coit drew in his breath. By very force of contrast, Dorcas's accent had brought back into his mind the memory of how her voice, one night not so very long ago, had rung hard in her swift antagonism. The memory flicked him like a lash.

"But could n't you despise him, Dorcas; that is, if you knew that he deserved it?"

From her place before the fire, she turned sharply to face him.

"Never!" she said impetuously, as, with her old gesture, she swept her clasped hands downward till they lay crushed against her skirt. "I might have my heart broken, Leonard. My life might change into mere existence with the hurt of it; but despise the man one married? Never!"

Next to Dorcas, Rica Braithwaite gained her greatest courage out of Gordon Coit. Not that it ever would have occurred to the great, jovial youngster to have offered help, or support, or any sympathy. He merely had a trick of prancing into the house and out again, jolly, irresponsible and loyal. He never moralized, never seemed to take Rica at all in earnest, never seemed to realize that she was not swimming placidly along on the topmost crest of the social wave. He dropped in on his way from the office, and seated

himself on the kitchen table to gossip with her, while she pared potatoes for his uncle's dinner. He ran in on his way down town of a morning, to bring her the latest bulletin from Betty; and, while he told her of their evening together in New York, two nights before, he pulled a chair forward to the table and demanded coffee, or a bit of marmalade and muffin. Braithwaite treated him with a grumbling criticism that by no means always escaped discourtesy; but Gordon disregarded it completely. Rica's greeting atoned to him for any hostility upon the part of Braithwaite.

The night before this last trip to New York, Gordon had dropped in casually, on his way out to dine, to ask if Rica had any especial messages to send down to Betty. Afterwards, the messages received, Gordon had lingered in the hall, loath to say good bye, without a word of sympathy. Even to his young eyes, it was quite plain that Rica had been crying. Her lids were reddened, swollen, and her voice was stiff and husky. To his questions, she admitted that Braithwaite did not seem quite well, admitted, too, that she had been a bit anxious about Lanier of late; but she forced herself to smile over her own admissions. She had a little cold; colds always made their victims pessimistic. And Gordon, standing there before her with her little hard hand in his big, soft one, looked by comparison with her shabby self a veritable young god of successfulness, tall, jovial and yet so very tender in his tacit appreciation of all the things she could no longer have, nor do, nor even mention. Despite his years, he had the tact, moreover, to keep his appreciation tacit to the end. Nevertheless, before he finally let go her fingers, he bent forward suddenly and kissed her on the forehead, a kiss akin to the one given by the devout worshiper to the garment's hem of his patron saint. Then he went away and left her there alone.

And Rica, while she turned away to go about her dinner dishes, was filled with pity for the mother, so early deprived of the companionship of such a son. It would have taken

the society of an almost infinite number of the holy angels, as Rica Braithwaite reckoned things, to have made up for the companionship of one honest, human, loving nature like that of Gordon Coit.

To Gordon, however, remembering Rica's face, as they stood together in the hall, there had been no cause for surprise when, late the next evening, Dickie had received her telegram. Arnold was very ill; it seemed a little like a slight shock. Would he bring Betty? As result, the three of them came by the first train in the morning.

To everyone's amazement, that of the doctor no less than of the others, Arnold Braithwaite rallied swiftly from what was evidently the slightest possible shock, that accommodatingly elastic term which serves in so many useful situations. For three days, he seemed at the very point of death. Three weeks later, he was up and about the house again, much in his usual way. The doctor, consulted about the future, furrowed his brows and meditated.

"I hate to say it to you, Mrs. Braithwaite," he confessed at last; "but the fact of the matter is that your husband is dying of sheer inanition. His only disease is passiveness. Rouse him. Stir him up to something. Make him go into any sort of business, if you can."

"What is there?" Rica asked him hopelessly, for to her the doctor stood in the light of a confessor, judicial, helpful, above all, discreet.

"Anything. If he can't go into an office, then let him go on the street cars as conductor. If he can't get in there, let him drive a delivery wagon, or even shovel coal. Blisters are healthy, and I can cure a lame back, if need be. Mrs. Braithwaite," he stared down at her fixedly, merciful even in his lack of mercy; "one thing is certain: your husband must do just one thing or the other, work, or die."

And then it was that Rica Braithwaite made up her mind that duty to her husband must drive her to revolt from him. All that night, she lay awake and pondered. Next morning,

leaving her breakfast dishes unwashed, she spent an unaccustomed hour before her neglected toilet table. Then, putting on her widest hat, she left the house without a word of explanation to her husband, and took a car down town.

Mr. Coit was in his office. He was busy with a man just now; but he would be at leisure, in a very few moments. If Mrs. Braithwaite cared to sit down and wait — The chair pushed forward completed the sentence. Rica did care to wait, and she sat down in the chair. First, though, she moved it quite across the little waiting-room. Else, she could have seen Gordon's wavy dark head bending above the desk which once had been her husband's. In her present mood, the sight would have stung Rica until it took away her power of coherent, forceful speech; and coherent, forceful speech was the one thing she had prayed for, all that waking night.

The next fifteen minutes tried her courage sorely by their need for passive waiting; but at last, when Coit was at leisure, she had once more steadied, and met him with a little smile.

"Rica!" he exclaimed heartily, as he shook hands with her on the threshold. "Really, this is very nice. And how is Arnold?" His other hand drew forward a chair and, with a gesture, pointed it out to her as for her use.

"Better," she answered, while she tucked her shabby gloves under a fold of her skirt. "He seems a good deal more like himself than I ever expected to see him again." Forgetful of her movement of proud secrecy, she lifted one hand and stared at its whitening finger-tips with grave, unseeing eyes. Then she added quietly, "I mean his later self, of course. I fancy we none of us will ever see the old Arnold Braithwaite any more."

"Oh, I hope not that, Rica," Coit protested. "He is run down and ill, and, I suppose, a little worried. Once he gets on his feet again though, he is sure to be all right."

For one instant, Rica glanced through the glass partition at her side. Beyond it, Gordon, a picture of prosperity and

peace, was whistling softly, as he bent above his desk. Then, —

“But how is he to get upon his feet?” she queried.

Coit bent forward, picked up a ruler from his table and fell to balancing it between his finger-tips.

“Oh, there must be some opening for him before long,” he answered, with an assumption of ease which was out of harmony with the nervousness of his fidgeting slim fingers.

The ease, or, rather, its assumption, angered Rica. The same anger, although far less logical, swept over her, as she glanced at his outstretched wrists, noting the workmanship of the heavy, simple cuff-links, noting the fine silk of the edge of sleeve beneath. And the time had been, and not so very long ago, that Arnold Braithwaite had worn just such things as these. However, anger was beside the point; she must deny herself even that poor luxury, and steady to the case in hand.

“Leonard,” she said to him abruptly; “do you mind laying down that ruler? It makes me very nervous; and, besides, I want you to pay all your attention to just me. I have come down, this morning, to ask — ”

Just then, still smiling slightly, he laid the ruler down and turned to face her. Rica left her phrase in suspension during the little interruption; and Coit, noting the pause, became uneasy. Up to now, he had trusted to the tact of Rica Braithwaite to keep things from becoming too insistent. Now his trust faded and, with his trust, his smile. However, —

“To ask?” he repeated after her.

Rica completed her phrase.

“Your advice,” she told him quietly. “Of course, nothing more.”

The first two words restored Coit’s apparent ease of mind. The last four, however, brought a faint colour to his cheeks.

“Anything I can do, Rica, of course. I’m afraid I’m not much good at giving advice; but perhaps I can plan up something a little bit more practical for me to do.”

Again, and, this time, quite involuntarily, Rica's eyes sought the glass partition.

"Perhaps you can," she assented then, as she recalled her wandering glance. "At least, Leonard, it is something to feel sure of your interest."

His reply came promptly, and with it, outstretched, came his hand.

"Oh, I hope you have never doubted that, Rica. What else are old friends good for? Even if they're no use in advising, they surely have a right to share the worries. What is it now?"

Instantly she reddened, at his unintentional implication that she was a woman given to driving her worries, tandem, before the public eye. When she spoke, moreover, the hauteur of her tone matched the reddening.

"I dislike so much to talk about it, Leonard. It always has been my creed to keep domestic worries to myself; but —"

Ignoring her thinly-veiled hostility, Coit leaned back in his chair and smiled across at her as if encouraging her to further frankness.

"What is it, Rica?" he inquired again, and, this time, he omitted the antagonizing *now*. "Has Betty been accumulating an undesirable proposal; or has Billy been getting into debt?"

"Neither," she assured him, a trifle curtly. "My children are the least of my worries. I came down here, this morning, to talk to you about Arnold."

"Arnold?" This time, it was Coit who flung a short, involuntary glance towards the glass partition.

Rica interpreted the glance; and then, as women will, reading between the lines, she went on to misinterpret it.

"Don't worry," she said, with quiet haughtiness. "I am not asking you to take back Arnold into his old place, whatever," slowly she lifted her eyes to Coit's face; "whatever I may think about the justness of the reasons for his leaving it. One can't undo the past, so easily as all that comes to.

Moreover," and her voice hardened until it became almost unrecognizable to her old friend, sitting there before her; "moreover, I doubt very much whether Arnold would consent to come back. No," as Coit flung another uneasy glance at the partition; "not if you went down upon your knees before him. He is n't made like that."

For an instant, Coit seemed in danger of losing his hold upon his temper.

"Then what in heaven's name does he want?" he demanded, with sudden impatience, while once more his fingers shut upon the ruler.

"He want!" The accent was quite indescribable; indescribable, too, the stress upon the single word that followed, "Nothing." Then, for a minute, Rica sat there, silent. When she spoke again, her level voice was hurried, even a little breathless, as now she rushed upon her explanation. "Arnold wishes nothing of you, Leonard. He has accepted as final your implication that he was superannuating too fast to let him remain of any use to you. Yes, I say *you*, because, in a sense, you stand back of the directorate. And God in heaven only knows how far your implication has made the possibility the fact. Arnold is superannuated now. He is an old, old man, much too old now to take any position of responsibility. He has distrusted his own judgment until he has warped it out of any semblance of being trustworthy. Better not put it into words who first suggested to him the distrust."

"But, Rica —"

Instantly she regained her hold upon herself, and spoke more calmly.

"Yes, Leonard, I know that it's unusual for any woman to be talking in this way about her husband. Still, you must grant that the whole case is a little bit unusual. Besides," her slow smile cut him to the quick; "you promised me that you would come to my rescue with your advice; and how can you give advice, before you know the ugly, absolute

facts? However — First of all, though, I must tell you this one thing: long, long ago, Arnold forbade me ever to mention this affair to you."

Coit did his best to answer easily.

"That was rather shabby of Arnold, Rica."

"Do you think so?" she asked him deliberately. Then she went on again. "I am not sure whether I promised him or not. In any case, it would make no difference now. No," for she caught the startled look in Coit's brown eyes; "I don't mean that he is as badly off as all that — quite. It's only that my disobedience is by order of the doctor. He says that Arnold must have some sort of a light occupation at once; or else — die."

The momentary hardness faded from Coit's eyes.

"Poor Rica!" he said gently. "I had no notion it all was as bad as that. Arnold, the last few times I've met him, has seemed comparatively content."

"That has been the worst phase of the whole," Rica told him, with grim brevity.

"Perhaps. In fact, I can see it now. And yet, it's not so strange that I misunderstood. However, now I know, it's all right at last. I'll send a note to him — " He spun about to face the table; then he spun back again. "No; I'll send up a messenger and ask him to come down. Not into his old office, of course; that would be too infernally cruel, to put him under Gordon. But, by the time he gets here, I'll think up a good little place for him somewhere or other." His voice grew cheery, while he formulated his plan.

Rica cut in upon his cheer.

"It would be quite useless to ask him to come back here, Leonard."

His eyes showed his surprise.

"Then what — "

Patiently she set herself to work to explain. Dorcas, in his place, she reflected, would have needed no word of explanation.

"If Arnold knew that the message came from you —"

With unexpected swiftness, he caught her explanation from her and completed it.

"He would not stir a step. Of course. I should have thought of that. Besides, he would be likely to trace it back to you, and that would only make it hard for you. Let's see what else." And he fell to drumming on his desk. "Of course, I'm a director in most things here; that only complicates the situation. Let's see. Let's see." He pondered deeply for a minute; then he spun back to the desk and picked the receiver off the telephone. "That you, Platt? All right." And the usual one-sided colloquy followed, while Rica sat by, silent, her cheeks whitening less at Coit's spoken words than at his careful omissions.

When at last she rose to her feet, she was surprised to feel that her knees were trembling underneath her weight. Mercifully for Rica Braithwaite, however, no mirror was at hand to show her how age had crept in upon her during that short half-hour while she had lowered her guard. Her fingers were icy, as they shut upon Coit's outstretched hand.

"Thank you, Leonard," she told him quietly. "I'm sure you have been very kind. I appreciate it all. I'm sorry Arnold can't thank you for himself; but, as you see, it's better for the present that he should not know."

And Coit assented gravely, —

"Best that he should never know, Rica. Why tell him ever, when you know it only would disturb him? Besides," he made a brave attempt for his old smile; "it's not the first time, by any means, that you and I have concocted plots together." But the attempt failed, and it was quite unsmilingly that he faced her in the end. "Rica," he told her, with a grave sincerity she could not doubt; "be very sure of this: I never would have allowed it, if I had suspected it could bring you to this."

For the moment, the tears gathered in Rica Braithwaite's

eyes. She brushed them away again at once, rather than let them fall.

"Thank you for that, Leonard," she made answer. "It is very good to find, inside the shell of all the years, the same old friend I used to know. Good bye, and — thank you." And, smiling bravely, she went away between the rows of curious clerks who lined the outer office.

The past hour had left upon her its permanent, merciless mark. Nevertheless, it was with a far better courage than she had known for many months that Rica Braithwaite ran lightly up the steps of her home.

"Ar-nold?" she called. "Ar-nold? Where are you, dear?"

The answering stillness cut its way into her misgivings, cold and sharp as blade of burnished steel.

"Ar-nold! Where are you?" she called again. "Come down, dear. I've had such a splendid walk, and I have things to tell you. Arnold! Where are you? Please do answer!"

She found him in his room and, mercifully, in his accustomed favourite armchair. His head was slightly tilted forward, and in his open eyes there lay the old alertness of his long-gone youth, alertness and a happy hope.

Perchance already, in that new life of his, the soul of Arnold Braithwaite had found its needed occupation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DICKIE came up from New York, that same noon, bringing Betty with him. Two weeks earlier, the girl had left home for the second time, full of good courage for her father's ultimate recovery. Now, the sudden shock had stunned her. She yielded a dazed assent to Dickie's hurried plans; but she seemed to feel neither grief for her father, nor concern for her mother, nor even pity for herself. Her dull apathy remained unbroken until she found Gordon waiting for her at the station. Then, forgetting Dickie absolutely, she clung to Gordon's arm, sobbing like a little, frightened child. And Dickie, very gently and without a single envious twinge, made signs to Gordon to drive on alone with Betty, while he followed on the nearest street car.

Dorcas was waiting for them when they reached the house, that afternoon. Indeed, it seemed to Dickie, looking on, that Dorcas pervaded all things, did all things, not officiously, not with any bustle, but quietly efficient, and steady as a die. Moreover, she obviously was doing things, not as she herself would choose, but as Rica, in her place, would have chosen. Dickie, knowing both the women far better than they had learned to know each other, marvelled at the insight with which Dorcas proved herself to be endowed. Rica, shut up in the room above, where Arnold Braithwaite lay asleep, might well have been the one making the plans and executing them down to the last detail.

Betty had gone away to her own room, and her brothers were wandering up and down the house with the futile restlessness men show at such a time, when Dickie, hanging about

the downstairs hall in the faint hope that he might prove to be of some slight use or other, became aware that Dorcas stood behind him on the stairs. As he turned, she made a glad little gesture of greeting, although her face was wan and very grave.

"Dickie," she said, speaking low, so that Rica, in that room above, might not be disturbed by their alien voices; "you always were a good old thing. Betty has been telling me a little bit about the way you've stood by her and helped her into work. I knew about it all, though, long before."

"But I never helped you any," he objected, as swiftly as if Dorcas had accused him of criminal intent.

"Perhaps not," she assented. "Still, I thought you did, on one or two occasions. Dickie, the best of help is n't always the purely practical. In the old days, you stuck to me like a burr, no matter what I did. Moreover, I owe you at least a few good lessons."

Her hand in his, she stood, smiling into his honest face for minutes longer. Then, still holding his hand, she turned with him towards the deserted library. On the threshold, she paused, looking swiftly up and down the room to assure herself that they would be alone. A moment later, she crossed the threshold swiftly, drew in Dickie after her, and closed the door behind them.

Dickie looked at her in undisguised astonishment. Such nervous sequences of action were not like Dorcas Sloane; still less, he suspected keenly, were they like Dorcas Coit.

"What 's up, Dorcas?" he queried, with a flippancy which, however unsuited to the atmosphere of the house, was yet quite intentional. "Wherefore this air of mystery?"

But Dorcas listened to his question, unsmiling and intent. Then, —

"Not mystery exactly, Dickie," she told him. "It's only that I need to see you quite alone, to ask you something that

you can tell me, something that it is my right to hear; but that —" her breath caught a very little; "that I'd rather not hear when other people are by."

For an imperceptible fraction of a moment, Dickie shut his teeth, while his mind rushed over every possible phase of any question bearing upon the life of Dorcas. Before he spoke, he plunged his fists into his pockets, and summoned back at least a share of his accustomed nonchalance.

"Fire ahead!" he bade her briefly.

She had been prepared to dwell, by way of preface, upon his old-time loyalty to her, upon her old-time reliance upon him; and then deftly to lead around to her reasons for seeking from him the answer to her question. Instead, his brevity rendered her brief in turn.

"Dickie, three weeks ago, one day when Mr. Lanier had — was — was n't —"

Dickie nodded. He would have preferred it that her question should not have concerned Lanier, of whom he had his doubts. Accordingly, he decided to phrase the matter as uncompromisingly as he was able.

"Was drunk," he said bluntly. "Well?"

Once more he was conscious of surprise. Dorcas, solely intent upon her question, accepted the ugly word without amendment. Dickie's face cleared. Perhaps, after all and in spite of all appearances, Lanier was not the chief concern of Dorcas Coit's existence. Dickie liked Coit and loathed Lanier. Both facts, however, were of slight account to him, beside his keen anxiety that Dorcas should hold fast to her ideals. Dickie had never gossiped; neither, to do him justice, had he laid much stress on Betty's babble. It was only that he owned a pair of eyes, and possessed a few ideals on his own account. Meanwhile, —

"Yes, drunk," Dorcas was assenting, with a curious indifference to both fact and phrase. "He hardly seemed to know what he was saying. Perhaps he only spoke at random, and because Leonard came in upon him at a wrong minute.

Anyway, Leonard did n't hear what it was he said; he was too far off. I was nearer, though, and I did hear."

When Dickie spoke again, his voice had taken on a new cadence, gentler, more full of quiet trust in his companion whom, as he suddenly suspected, he might have wronged a little.

"Well?" though, was all he said.

But for a minute Dorcas did not answer. She had dropped down into a chair and clasped her hands across her face, as if to shut out the picture so distinct in her memory: a picture of a distorted face, of suffused eyes and of one curved hand, pawing, pawing in futile madness amid the slipping, slithering seeds of yellow grain.

Suddenly she sat up straight again, bringing her clasped hands downward in a long, strong sweep.

"He said," she told Dickie, with a breathless haste which showed him just how little she dared trust her courage to endure; "he said to Leonard that, if Arnold Braithwaite died, he — Leonard — would be the murderer."

For a minute, Dickie stood staring at her, stupefied by his own relief. After all his pothor and anxiety, Dorcas was hanging fast to her old ideals. Lanier was nothing but an episode. Her loyalty was all for her husband; her defensive mood was all in Coit's behalf. It took Dickie a full minute to grasp his relief in its entirety. Now that his anxiety was vanishing, he knew for the first time how acute that anxiety had been.

"Well?"

He pulled himself together sharply, at the stern demand of Dorcas's monosyllable.

"Lanier always was a bit of a serpent," he replied evasively. "I'm not surprised at anything he says or does. By the way, where is he?"

"Leonard sent him off."

Dickie nodded.

"Mighty wise of Leonard, I must say. I thought I

had n't seen him anywhere about, since we came up, this noon."

"He's been gone, three weeks. Leonard sent him off, directly after — " Again she shuddered.

"*Post et propter*," Dickie said. And then he whistled softly. "Coit, as I say, is wise."

But Dorcas contradicted, and her contradiction sounded impatient.

"No; it was n't on account of it, Dickie. I told you that Leonard did n't hear. But never mind about his going. That's not the point."

"What is?" Dickie asked her flatly.

"What he said. Dickie," and, despite the fear that lay within their depths, her brown eyes sought his eyes bravely; "what did he mean by using such a word about Leonard?"

Forgetful of his recently-acquired relief, Dickie looked manifestly uneasy.

"Lanier apparently has the trick of metaphor, Dorcas," he replied, with palpable evasion.

"But metaphor is always based on fact," she told him, with a curious academic insistence upon the detailed definition. Then once more she faced him. "Dickie, I never knew you to lie to me, not even," she gave a nervous little laugh; "even when you loathed the stories you knew that I believed were great. Don't lie to me now, then. What did Mr. Lanier mean? For he did mean something definite."

Then Dickie stopped evading.

"It's only that, like every other drunkard, Dorcas, Lanier magnified into a mountain the mole-hill that we all have seen," he argued. "Still, he was an utter cad to try to roll the mountain down on top of you. Not even a caucus of the heavenly host could have held Coit responsible for the way that Uncle Arnold went to pieces. The trouble was in him from the start, just as surely as Lanier's vice was born in him; and neither one of them has been man enough to shove up his sleeves and fight it."

"But why should Leonard's name be used in the connection?" Dorcas demanded.

"Oh, the way one always takes the fattest scapegoat for a sin," Dickie replied, as tranquilly as if he were not well-nigh torn asunder by his divergent loyalties, the one to Dorcas, the other to his kinsfolk.

"But why Leonard?" Dorcas persisted.

"Just because he was the man who ousted Uncle Arnold, in the first place," Dickie responded, in sudden frankness.

"Ousted? Uncle Arnold?" Dorcas echoed, in too blank a question to heed her own appropriation of Braithwaite as a relative.

"Sure," Dickie told her cheerily. Then he added, by way of explanation. "To make room for Gordon, don't you know."

"Dickie!" Of a sudden, Dorcas had grown very white.

"Certainly," Dickie iterated. "It's done, every day. Of course, the place was bound to go to Gordon."

"Why?"

Dickie, struck full in the face by the question, was too stunned by it to think of dodging.

"Heredity. Pull. Anything you choose to name it. When Coit dies, Gordon will be the head of things. As for poor Uncle Arnold, he was in luck to hold the place down for so long."

"But," Dorcas reverted to the subject of her former question; "but Gordon did n't need it."

"What if he did n't? He was the man who was bound to have it, and business advisability does n't always take one's personal needs into account." There came a note of unaccustomed bitterness into the jovial voice of Dickie.

But Dorcas, deaf to his last words, had risen to her feet and now was pacing to and fro across the room, her hands gripped tight together behind her back. Her gown of vivid brown matched her high coils of bright brown hair, its bits of golden decoration were scarcely brighter than her glow-

ing, angry eyes, scarcely more hard. Dickie watched her uneasily, while her step grew quick and ever quicker. Then, before he could make up his mind what he best would say to her next, she had burst out impetuously.

"Dickie, it's false! It's a wicked lie! My husband has never done a thing like that, never in all his life."

"But I am afraid he has, Dorcas," Dickie told her gravely.

For the first time in their acquaintance, she turned on him as on a foe.

"You think so, because they are your relatives," she accused him, in quick disdain. "I suppose you have heard their side of it, and believed it all implicitly."

"Dorcas," Dickie's voice was yet more grave; "do you mean you never knew it until now?"

Again she flashed into anger.

"I beg your pardon, Dickie! I do not know it now. Do you realize of what you are accusing Mr. Coit? Such a thing is quite impossible."

"Why is it so impossible?" Dickie demanded, a trifle angry in his turn.

"Because a thing like that is only so much concentrated selfishness," she answered; and the words seemed to cut the air, as they fell, separate and distinct, and instinct with antagonism, between Dorcas Coit and Dickie.

"But —"

Imperiously she lifted her hand, where the great diamond of her engagement ring blazed out in defiant guardianship of her wedding circlet.

"And," she went on, in slow, insistent disregard of his attempted interruption; "and selfishness like that would be unthinkable to such a man as Leonard Coit."

And then, without another word, she went away and left Dickie standing there alone.

That night, alone and sleepless, Dorcas Coit was doomed to know the misery of something akin to hell, a hell all the more hideous because she had descended to it straight from

heaven. Just how flawless she had come to consider Leonard Coit she never once had dreamed, until, all of a sudden, she had found herself confronted with the flaw. Neither had she ever gained the slightest inkling of how much she had exulted in his flawlessness. Bit by bit, as she had gone steadily onward from passive acceptance of his love to a bountiful return of it, she had, by the same measure, grown to a throbbing consciousness of her own increasing love. And she had loved him, not as one loves an equal, but as one loves the saints in heaven. Looking backward now, she realized that her only antagonisms had been aroused by his holy intolerance of weakness and of sin. And now —

The worst of it all, to Dorcas, was the belief that, in such a case as this, Coit could not have sinned unknowingly, could not have gone his way in tranquil ignorance of the daily, hourly consequences of his sin. That it was a sin, her downright mind did not question for a minute. Not even her loyal adoration for her husband could have led her to quibble thus 'twixt right and wrong. Selfishness was sin; and it was surely selfish to seize for one's own superabundant hoard the equivalent of one's neighbour's needful daily bread and meat. Coit knew, by his own showing, that Arnold Braithwaite, having no income but his salary, yet lived far beyond the income; that, when the salary stopped, he would have nothing left behind. And Coit also knew that he himself had an hundred times enough for both himself and Gordon, and for their childrens' children. If Gordon's manhood demanded work, then why not make a new place for him, not filch that of a weaker man, a man so prematurely old that his adaptability was well-nigh spent? Surely the Leonard Coit whom she had supposed she married, could never plan so cowardly a deed

And, planned, what of the execution? Alone and in the dark, Dorcas shut her teeth and pressed her hands upon her hot, dry eyes, as if to close them to the naked truth which frowned down at her through the gloom. From plan to ex-

ecution marked the step from selfishness to merciless brutality. And the step had been traversed by Leonard Coit, her husband, the one sinless, stainless man of all her moral world, the man who had confessed himself intolerant of weakness, ignorant of the appeal made by a swift temptation. Which was the worse: to be weak, to know temptation and, knowing it, to yield; or to — In mercy to her own sanity, Dorcas forebore to finish out the question.

Coit, in their first day at The Terraces, had confessed to caring much for Rica Braithwaite, caring for her, that is, as one does care for the friendships that have lasted from one's little childhood. He had spoken more than once of her bravery and her devotion to her futile husband. And Coit was not dim of sight, nor was he slow of comprehension. All their world had watched the swift disintegration of the Braithwaites' old prosperity, had watched the equally swift wreckage of Arnold Braithwaite's manhood. Least of them all was Coit, their neighbour and their old-time friend, likely to blind himself to the progress of their ruin of which he had been the cause. As for the fable which concerned the board of directors, that was wholly negligible. It was an open secret that the directors were chosen by their president. At least, however, Coit himself had never taken refuge behind the phrase; it had merely been the tool of others. In so far, he was above the level of Lanier, who sought to shunt the consequences of his sin by setting down its causes to the accounts of other people.

Poor Lanier! How trivial his sins appeared to her now! They were the careless yielding to temptation; they reacted only on himself. They lacked deliberation, even as they also lacked the dignity of apparently undying consequences. Lanier was futile, even in his sin. But with Leonard it was different. Swiftly, and with a physical revulsion from her own hateful self, Dorcas buried her shamed head in the blankets, as she fain would have buried it from the sight of the All-Judge. And had it come to this, as the last, worst

consequence of all: that she, Dorcas Coit, could be so faithless to her marriage vows as to magnify her husband's fault by deliberate comparison with the weakness of another man? *For better, for worse.* Surely, this was the worse; but what of that? Was it not all included in her promises? In her swift self-recoil, she took a savage satisfaction when the diamond on her finger cut deep into the palm of the hand that she had clinched about it. The smart of the sudden wound stung her to fling out an audible expression of the revulsion of her feelings: that Coit, even taken as he was, flaws and all, was infinitely nobler than any other man.

All next day, she fought the matter over; the conscious, careless selfishness of Coit, the merciless disregarding of the suffering which he alone had caused; the lowering of her idol, and his present dominance, however lowered, above the heads of all his mates. Viewed in the cold light of the business world, perhaps the sin was venial. What Dorcas found it hardest to forgive was the placid disregard with which Coit had stood by and viewed the consequences. And, back of all the rest and mingled with it, was a curious sense of disappointment in herself. Always, in the old days, Dorcas had held fast to her own ideals. Now, with prosperity crowding insistently before her, were her ideals becoming blunted; or was she letting go her grasp upon them, that she could so long have been blinded to the fact that Coit was sliding down from them to another, lower plane?

All next day she spent with Rica Braithwaite. The day before, she had gone to her as one goes to any friend in trouble. Now she went to her in a grim mood of expiation. If Leonard had done the harm, it was her place to do all she could to take the edge off from the consequences. All day, then, she remained with Rica Braithwaite. Moreover, when the long, listless afternoon was waning, she announced her intention of not returning home, until the funeral was over, the next day. She let it go that she remained there out of loyalty to Rica; she even accepted Rica's protesting grati-

tude, unchallenged. The fact of the matter was, she lacked the courage, in her present mood, to sit out the long, formal dinner at The Terraces, beneath the watchful gaze of Wier and opposite to her husband. Her mirror had assured her that no sympathy for Rica Braithwaite would be sufficient to account for her haggard face and dry, hot lips. And, besides, her husband would be sure to discuss the Braithwaite situation in all its phases, past, present and to come.

As it chanced, then, Dorcas had no glimpse of her husband until, among the other honorary bearers, he stood beside Arnold Braithwaite's open grave. Then, for a moment, Dorcas's eyes rested upon him with sober pride. Beside his wide shoulders, his snow-white hair and the intense refinement of his quiet face and bearing, the other men around him looked like perky puppets, dwarfed and underbred. Coit — But suddenly Dorcas remembered. Remembering, she had a wayward longing to tear the black gloves from Coit's hands. Lanier, albeit drunk, had told the hideous truth: in the sight of the Infinitely Just One, Coit was nothing else than Arnold Braithwaite's murderer. How, then, was it possible for him to stand there, watching with grave, sad eyes, the flower-heaped body sink slowly to its mother dust?

Gordon, standing at her elbow, his eyes, not on the heap of flowers, but on Betty's haggard face, suddenly became aware that Dorcas was shivering. He forgot Betty in the nearer need, and, drawing Dorcas's hand inside his arm, stepped closer to her side, as though to steady her with his great strength. The moment that the last words were uttered, commending Arnold Braithwaite to his Father's care, Gordon looked up and made a little signal to Coit's man. With every instant, Dorcas was leaning more heavily upon his arm; it would be best to get her home, before the inevitable collapse.

The collapse, when it came, shocked and surprised Gordon by its still intensity. Dorcas, as he had always known her, was self-reliant, optimistic. Dorcas, as he saw her now, was pitiful in clinging to her old ideals, now prostrate in the dust

of warring loyalties and judgments, pitiful in the way she flung herself upon him for support.

At last, however, the storm stilled itself a little. Rather, it died away, exhausted by its own violence. When it was at an end, Dorcas faced Gordon with a piteous little smile.

"I am glad you can go on fighting for him, as you do," she said. "I fought for him, myself, as long as I was able; and now —"

Quiet, manly, Gordon bent down and took her hand into his own.

"Dorcas," he told her gravely; "it is my right and privilege to fight for him. Moreover, the time will surely come, when you are able to do it again, yourself. You are tired out and upset by all this horror at the Braithwaites'. The worry of Uncle Duncan has been too much for you, too. I knew it, all along; I could n't do anything to prevent it, though. And now I can't prevent your feeling about this thing, the way you do. I suppose it's bound to show: the innate difference between men and women. We men take things a good deal more on trust. When our trust goes wrong, we keep on trusting it, sure it will come out right in time, instead of reasoning it out into a problem that is ten times worse than the initial fact, and then giving up the problem in the end."

"How can it come out right?" Dorcas asked him drearily. "This especial thing, I mean?"

"God only knows," Gordon answered, and the trite words were full of earnestness, not flippant. "Dad is n't perfect. None of us are. But I'm not going to hunt him over for more scratches, just because this one affair may seem to you to have marred the surface of his perfection just a little bit. In fact," he added thoughtfully, his eyes upon the wall across the room, rather than on the piteous face of Dorcas; "the time may come when we both will realize that the scratch is only the simplest way of showing us the quality of the stuff that's underneath. Don't worry, Dorcas; and, for God's

sake, don't go to analyzing the mess and reading into it all sorts of extras that have no right to be there. One never gets the better of a trouble in any such way as that. Instead, shut your eyes to the thing you have n't got, and hang on like grim death to the things you have. Dad 's sound. It 's only that we can't get hold of all his side of the thing."

Smiling, he dropped her hand, and went away in tardy search of Betty. Outside the house, however, his brave smile dropped off from him, as drops a reveller's mask upon the stroke of midnight. And poor Gordon's midnight was very, very black.

"If only it had n't been done for me!" he said to himself forlornly.

Then he threw back his shoulders and stiffened himself in every limb.

"Poor dad!" he said, as he faced forward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

As Dorcas had explained to Dickie, Leonard Coit had sent Lanier away, sharply, arbitrarily, absolutely.

"The time has come, Lanier, when I believe I have the right to insist upon it," he said, with grave, remote formality, two days after the scene inside the stable.

Furtively Lanier moistened his feverish lips; furtively he peered up at Coit from beneath his eyebrows. He wondered vaguely, the only wonder as yet of which his fuddled brain was capable, whether Coit had overheard his accusation, and whether this move was a mere bit of retaliation. He also wondered, still quite vaguely, whether Coit had been aware that, left to himself in the sudden alarm concerning Braithwaite, he had at last been able to grip the bottle in his hand. A dual consciousness, in fact, appeared to be developing in Lanier, during those latter days. One part of him seemed able to realize the increasing weakness of the other, to realize it and, more, to deplore it. The deploring was the one grip he held nowadays upon a moral immortality.

However, Coit was noncommittal. After all that had gone before, during the past six months, it seemed to him superfluous to dwell upon the specific history of any especial six hours. The omission, however, was more for the sake of his own dignity than to preserve any shreds of self-respect within Lanier. Coit saw no need to mention the detail that Lanier had been found, dead drunk, upon the stable floor, the bottle in his hand; that, in sheer mercy to Rica, who was in no condition to receive her paying guest in such a state as that, Wier had been ordered to see to it that Lanier

was put out of sight in a corner of The Terraces, to sleep it off as comfortably and as speedily as he was able. And Wier, who of them all was most fully conscious of the steady decay of the qualities which should have made for manhood, even in such an one as Duncan Lanier would always be, Wier, loyal to the old tradition of the Lanier name, himself had picked up Lanier bodily in his own wiry arms and lugged him off to safety, rather than allow the other, younger servants to look upon him in his degradation. Of such stuff is the stolid Briton made. It is on this account alone that theirs should be the kingdom.

As a natural result of Wier's diplomacy, Dorcas, absorbed in the misfortunes of the Braithwaites, was quite unconscious of the fact that Lanier, half guest, half captive, was under the roof of The Terraces. By the time she found it out, Lanier was gone. Rica, questioned, was totally noncommittal; but Gordon, with exceeding nonchalance, blurted out the truth.

"Dad advised him to clear out," he told Dorcas, in answer to her queries. "I must say, I can't blame dad. I'm sorry for Uncle Duncan; but, really, he's about reached the limit. What's more, he's getting more and more demoralized from day to day."

"Are you forsaking your old loyalty to him, Gordon?" Dorcas rebuked him.

The colour flamed in Gordon's cheeks.

"Loyalty be hanged, Dorcas! I tell you I'm sorry for Uncle Duncan, infernally sorry. Still, I can't waste too much pity on a man who lets himself go to every kind of length, and then sits down and whimpers over the resulting ruin and tries to lay the blame on everybody but himself."

To her own excessive consternation, Dorcas felt her soul rise up in full agreement with Gordon's point of view. Bit by bit, her attitude to Lanier had been changing out of pity into scorn, out of attraction into something dangerously

akin to loathing. The change, however, had been too deliberate for her to be aware of it, until, by now, the measuring bits, taken together, mounted high. And was it entirely the result of his alcoholic appetite which caused her, every now and then, to feel her innate womanhood shiver in repulsion, as his brown eyes met hers? Was it that her efforts at regeneration were proving useless; that once again her chosen object had played her false? Was it indeed that Lanier's moral canker, feeding upon his weaknesses, was slowly spreading to cover his whole spiritual system? And, in that case, how much was disease, and therefore unaccountable; how much was sin for which the All-Judge would hold him to a strict account?

Coit's interview with Lanier had been short. As soon as Wier reported that his captive was once more in condition to be reasoned with, Coit had lost no time in taking himself to the little room above the butler's pantry, where Lanier was breakfasting on tea and toast. Lanier, the while, was feeling exceedingly sorry for himself, by reason of the frugal nature of his diet, of the unlovely lack of luxury in his surroundings. When Coit appeared upon the threshold, grim and stern as an avenging angel, Lanier lifted his head and sought to bluster. A moment afterward, finding his blusterings vain, he lowered his head and began to whimper. This later spectacle drove Coit to an anger which found vent only in curt command.

"You have made trouble enough for all of us," he said briefly; "especially for Dorcas. I can't have her worried by your beastly habits any more. This noon, you will take yourself out of town; and, what's more, you will stay there. Wier will help you to get off. He's at the Braithwaites' now, with a note to Rica; he will see to packing up your things. You'll go at noon, to-day." The last words, stern and measured, came like blows of a rawhide lash wielded by a mighty and an angry arm. Small wonder that Lanier, now whimpering weakly, yielded to their command.

Afterwards, Coit had had his inevitable bad half-hours of wondering if he had acted wisely. Not at the first, however. The increasing worries of the Braithwaites, filling the mind of Dorcas, overflowed upon himself. Not that Coit questioned his own part in the Braithwaites' bad days, however. Years before, he had made up his mind that Gordon, out of college, would step into Arnold Braithwaite's shoes; that, as a matter of course, his only son would have an important office in the corporation which he himself virtually owned. That Gordon's stepping into Arnold Braithwaite's shoes must of necessity leave Arnold Braithwaite barefoot was a detail which had escaped Coit's mind entirely. The whole matter had been virtually settled so many years ago that, for all Coit knew to the contrary, Arnold Braithwaite might have a dozen pairs of shoes hoarded up in readiness for the time when the change should come to pass; that, or his feet might by then be wandering among the celestial asphodels. It all was too remote to have the details make very much impression. By the time the remote future was ready to become the present fact, Coit had ceased to think very much about the causes of the change. Other and more absorbing interests had arisen. The country was said to be upon the edge of a panic. Like every other successful business man, Coit's plans were half a decade ahead of the date upon the calendar. Arnold Braithwaite was ancient history to him, from the moment that Gordon took possession of his official desk.

Of course, being human and humane, Coit had been keenly conscious of the Braithwaite troubles. He even had vaguely wondered now and then whether he could not find some way out of them. Then his hard business sense had put down the hope. Not alone his relationship to Gordon had made him feel the gain to the business from his son's young, steady grip upon the details of his department, from Gordon's alert, aggressive outlook for new opportunity. And Gordon was no better and no worse than scores of other men of his age

and training. Then, in common conscience, could Coit urge his acquaintances to give to Arnold Braithwaite the place which a younger man would fill so infinitely better? His pity had remained; his judgment had stayed his effort to make good his pity.

Despite the inevitable pain of such a conversation as his had been with Rica, that morning in the office, there yet had been a certain satisfaction to Coit in receiving her appeal. It put the whole affair upon a sentimental basis, and so it justified, in a sense, his urging Braithwaite's feeble claims. What should induce one to suspend judgment, he asked himself, once Rica had departed, if not the demands of years-long friendship? He went back to his interrupted morning's work, feeling the better for the interruption. It was a distinct shock, an hour later, when Dorcas called him up and told him that Rica, returning from an errand down town, had come into the house to discover that Braithwaite was dead, had died alone, and very painlessly. Coit's black gloves at the funeral were not by any means the only sign of his sincere mourning for his old-time friend.

Watching Dorcas keenly, in the succeeding days, Coit at first wondered that Arnold Braithwaite's death should have upset her so completely. Then, as the days dragged on into weeks, he could no longer persuade himself that the change in Dorcas was due to that one cause. That Dorcas was changed, there could be no sort of question. She had grown thin; she even looked transparent now and then, although her whiteness was stained by scarlet patches in her cheeks, above which her brown eyes glittered like bits of shining metal, as bright and fully as impenetrable. To all seeming, the girl was being eaten up by a fever whose very mention she scorned completely. Her manner, too, showed the change in her no less than did her looks. She had hours of silent brooding, she who had been so downright and so fearlessly outspoken; and these hours were broken by moments of nervous, rambling talk which touched on every trifle con-

ceivable, but never came to rest on any important personal phase of any question.

Coit watched and worried, while, by slow degrees, the theory of the Braithwaites as a cause dwindled and sank out of sight before another theory, ugly, unthinkable. Was Dorcas mourning for the absence of Lanier who, five full weeks ago, had dropped completely from their sight and ken? The theory, still half-formulated, was bound to be put to a test with disconcerting promptness.

"Gordon," Dorcas said, one night at dinner, after Wier had gone away and left the three Coits quite alone; "when have you heard from Betty?"

Gordon felt the telltale colour rushing up into his face. Nevertheless, he cracked a nut deliberately, before he made equally deliberate reply.

"A day or two ago," he said then.

Dorcas smiled at the manifest embarrassment which Gordon believed himself to be covering so completely.

"Is she coming home?"

"I hardly think so; at least," Gordon blushed still more hotly; "not just at present. She's better off down there."

"Until her mother moves, perhaps," Dorcas assented.

"She is n't going to move; that is, until she gets an offer for the place." Gordon cracked another nut and sat munching it in silence.

Coit broke the silence.

"It is better for her to stay on there, until she sells the house. At this season, it's no more to keep it up than it is to pay insurance on its being empty."

"But think of her, alone all day in that great house!" Dorcas said shortly. "It's horrible."

Gordon looked up, his eyes full of a new idea.

"What a blessing it was, the way Uncle Duncan took himself off, just when he did!" he remarked to no one in particular. "It was a mysterious deed in the time of it, and totally unaccountable; but I begin to think the hand of

Fate might have been in it all. He could n't well have stayed on there with her alone; and he'd have hated like the mischief to take away his board money, just at the very time she needed it the most. Apart from the finger of Fate, though, I wonder what it really was that took him off."

"Your father," Dorcas reminded him, and her accent was a little bitter.

"I wonder why." Gordon spoke out of a period of rumination.

In his turn, Coit looked up. For a minute, his eyes searched the face of Dorcas, then of his son. The one was hostile, the other meditative.

"After the way we found him in the stable, Gordon, I felt there were no two ways about it. My wife," in face of her hostility, Coit felt his voice grow masterful, rather than protective; "my wife must not be subjected to another spectacle like that."

Dorcas lifted her head proudly, spoke proudly.

"Your wife could have arranged that for herself, Leonard."

"No," Coit's tone grew gentler; "not while she remained my wife."

Quite without intention on his part, his phrase stung her to a sort of dull fury, a fury to which she would have been a total stranger, had it not been for the long, long series of sleepless nights and agonizing days, days and nights when she had vainly tried to lower the tide of her affection to match the lowered pedestal on which she had placed that love's sole object. Now, —

"Have you ever questioned my remaining in that place, Leonard?" she demanded coldly.

Because in reality he had questioned it so little, he told her the remorseless truth.

"No, Dorcas. My only fear has been that I might hold you there against your will."

"And why?" she demanded, for a second time. "Have I ever given you cause for such a doubt as that?"

"N — no," he was beginning.

She realized a sudden fear lest she had inadvertently showed out some phases of the storm that still raged within her. The fear gave energy to her next words.

"You speak as if you had your mental reservations, Leonard." She pushed her chair away from the table and, moving across the room, stood facing him, with one bare arm resting on the mantel. "In mercy's name, don't hold back anything! If you have any questions about me, speak out and let me answer them. Anything is better, anything, than brooding over faults in the person one ought to consider wholly faultless. I have learned that lesson for myself."

Surprised at her sudden outbreak, alarmed at the whiteness which surrounded the scarlet patch in either cheek, Coit had been sitting in quiet attention to her words, hoping by his own exceeding steadiness to win her back into some sort of self-control. At her final phrase, however, his quiet left him, and he sat up sharply while, in their turn, his cheeks tinged themselves with a scarlet akin to that which dyed her own.

"Dorcas," he said a little hoarsely; "for God's sake, tell me exactly what you mean."

"But, dad, —" Gordon was trying vainly to break in upon the scene, before it should reach its inevitable ugly climax.

Dorcas flung aside his efforts, as she would have tossed a bit of floating weed out of the stream down which she was swimming strongly.

"Hush, Gordon! Why not tell him?" she said sternly. "At least, then, he will know just how he stands before me. Leonard," she faced back to him once more; "it is merely this: after all these months, these happy months, I have seen the clay feet of my idol, the flaw in," her voice broke; "in my ideal. I married you, as much as anything because you offered me the one way out of all my worries, the one chance towards a life that seemed to me, then, worth living."

"Then?" he interrupted her, more hoarsely still.

In their turn, his words were also flung aside.

"Wait!" she bade him sharply. "Hear the rest. I liked you, when I married you. How fast that liking turned to love, how intense that love was, you, a man, can never know. I saw no faults in you; perhaps I was blind, perhaps there were none that came into my way. In any case, I grew to look on you as perfect, to glory in the fact that I had been the woman you had chosen to become your wife. And then, all at once, I found — " she glanced across at Gordon; but Gordon, his eyes lowered and his face sternly impassive, was drawing pictures with the nut-crackers on the cloth.

More swiftly than words can tell the bare fact, Coit flung his mind backward over all his life. Then steadily he spoke.

"Well?" he asked her; then steadily he sat and waited for her answer.

"It was not well," she retorted; "it was an ugly fact I found. Leonard," letting her arm fall from the mantelpiece, she clasped her hands behind her and stood, erect and hostile, facing him, while she put the question; "did you hear what Duncan Lanier told you, that morning in the stable?"

Silently Coit shook his head. Her dragging out the hideous picture in this connection surprised and shocked him till it removed the power of speech.

"He said," Dorcas's words fell upon the room with crisp incisiveness; "that, if Arnold Braithwaite died, you would be his murderer."

Despite the tension of the scene, Coit smiled. It was unthinkable to him that Dorcas could lay great stress upon the utterances of a man in Lanier's condition.

"My dear," he was beginning very gently.

Yet once again, Dorcas interrupted.

"Why argue about it, and try to dodge the truth, Leonard?" she asked him coldly. "The facts have been open to all the world. All the world has known it, has discussed it; all, with the sole exception of your wife. No, Gordon.

Wait! It is best to finish now. One does n't care to talk about a thing like this too many times. Leonard," and into her next words she flung the concentrated bitterness, distilled by weeks of brooding on what she accepted unquestioningly as fact; "you can't deny it that you put Arnold Braithwaite out of his place, in order to put in your son; that you took away from Arnold Braithwaite his one resource, his one way to support himself and Rica, took away his one poor little chance, to heap it upon the top of your many, many golden — yes, golden, minted, if you will — your own many golden opportunities. And then you sat back, your sympathetic, friendly hands clasped before you, and watched Arnold Braithwaite dying by inches of starvation. Leonard Coit, when I think of all that you have done," she stilled her angry voice until it dropped to the merest murmur, but the murmur lost nothing in hostility; "when I remember all the ruin you have accomplished, then I echo the words of Duncan Lanier, and label you as Arnold Braithwaite's murderer."

Slowly, very slowly, Coit's face had flushed and then grown white. From white, it went to the colour of wood ashes. Nevertheless, he did not flinch at her arraignment. Rather, he sat quite still, as one shot down by a fatal bullet. When he spoke at last, his voice was still, and his lips scarcely moved, as the voice came forth between them.

"Perhaps I am," he said slowly. "Dorcas, it may seem to you incredible; but — but I never thought of it like that before."

"Then why did you — " She checked herself, and, moving to the other end of the room, fell to rearranging the heavy silver on the sideboard.

Coit's voice aroused her.

"Dorcas," he asked; "will this make — any difference?"

She changed the tense of his question. How intentionally she did so, Gordon, sole spectator of the scene, could not fathom.

"It has," she told him slowly. "How could it help it?"

"Perhaps not. I am very sorry." And Gordon, knowing his father's present mood better than any woman could ever know, knew also that the heart of Leonard Coit was near to breaking. Nevertheless, Coit went on steadily. "It was all so gradual, Dorcas; all so a matter of every-day business routine; it all was planned so long before it really happened, I never quite connected it with what came after."

"Then why, whenever I spoke about the affair, did you change the subject?" she asked him.

Coit's reply came with an obvious sincerity which would have put an end to any doubts less carefully cherished than were hers.

"Because, when Braithwaite was down and out, I hated to say how superior to him in every way Gordon was showing himself," he answered, and Gordon, hearing, flung him a look of grateful recognition for the words.

Dorcas saw the look, interpreted it that she stood alone, fighting the two of them. Forgetful of her woman's dignity for just this once, she took refuge in a sneer.

"You were considerate Leonard. I hardly looked for that from you, after the way you acted in the case of Mr. Lanier."

No attack upon his own integrity had been able to arouse Coit to wrath. This second dragging of Lanier into the discussion accomplished it, however.

"Please leave Lanier out of it, Dorcas!" he bade her sharply.

Her arching brows moved upward.

"But why?" she made cold query. "Surely, he is a case in point. From the way you always have prided yourself on not being able to comprehend temptation such as his, I had no reason to look on you as vulnerable. Leonard," she spoke with rising passion; "as I stand here before you now, I believe that, in the sight of God, Duncan Lanier is not so guilty as are you. His sin is a sudden yielding to temptation; yours is a deliberate plan."

"Dorcas, do you realize what you are saying?" Coit demanded sternly.

"I do."

"Then — " he hesitated, paused, and, for moments, they were silent, eyes meeting eyes like steel. At last Coit spoke, his voice almost inaudible. "Dorcas," he asked her slowly; "is it that you love Lanier?"

For the space of one second, Dorcas stood dazed. The next second, she turned on Coit with the fury of a maddened tigress.

"Leonard!" she said. But the single word was all-sufficient.

Coit felt as though he must be choking, his breath came so short in his instantaneous relief. In the moment of his doubts departing from him, he first realized their bigness. He spoke with difficulty, while the veins about his temples filled well-nigh to bursting, then throbbed till the skin about them was all a-quiver with their beating.

"It is not true?" he questioned eagerly, too concentrated upon his own relief to heed her growing passion.

Not even Gordon, who once before had seen her close to the verge of madness, was prepared for the storm of passion when it broke. That other storm had been still, intensive. This was like the wild sweep of the cyclone, a tempest born of her long waiting for Lanier's effete manhood to grow and put forth fruit; nourished by the nerve strain, not only of Lanier's total failure to come up to her exaggerated ideals of what he might become, but of her husband's crashing fall from her ideals of what he really, truly was; and now brought to a central point of storm by this final outrage to her womanhood, this implied suspicion of her loyalty to her own marriage vows. The tigress had crouched at bay before. Now she sprang to the attack.

"How dare you ask the question?" she demanded. "How dare you sit there, face to face with the woman you have sworn to honour to the end of time, and insult her in such a

way as this? Leonard Coit, speak out and say to me exactly what you mean! All, all of it!"

For the moment, she stood glaring down upon him, well-nigh demoniac in her insulted dignity. Then the passion left her as suddenly as it had come; and, sinking down into the nearest chair, she buried her face upon the table.

"That it should ever come to this!" she moaned. "I thought my love was dead. Instead of that, it was more alive than ever, before my husband killed it." And the heavy folds of damask wrinkled beneath her clutching arms.

Coit rose and stood beside her, half dazed, half terrified at what he had done.

"Dorcas, child, don't," he begged her brokenly, as he rested a strong hand upon her shining hair.

Without stirring otherwise, she shook his hand away.

"Don't touch me," she bade him bitterly. "You have annulled your right to that." And then once more, without warning, she fell into the same low moaning, as of an animal in pain. The moaning ceased, however, as abruptly as it had begun. "What should make you dream I loved him?" she demanded, without looking up.

"Dorcas," Coit was using every ounce of strength he had, in the effort to hold himself steady to the end; "I did n't think so. I only was afraid."

"Why?" The syllable fell coldly. Then her anger warmed once more. "Tell me, please," she ordered him.

Coit's face stiffened with the strain he placed upon himself. Across the table, Gordon sat, as if he had been turned into stone.

"Tell me," Dorcas iterated sternly.

"How can I tell you, Dorcas? It was all so vague, so made up out of trifles: the note you burned —"

"How did you know I burned it?" she demanded fiercely. Then she added drearily, "Well, never mind that now. What else?"

"The night he came to see you, to insist on some vague right or other over you —"

"That was the bottle I had hidden." She seemed to be making the comment to herself. "Well, go on."

Coit mustered the last bits of his strength.

"The understanding that there evidently was between you; the way you seemed to share his point of view, to apologize even for his weaknesses. I—I am an older man, Dorcas, far too old to be the husband of a girl like you; too old, I know now, to hold her love all concentrated upon me, too old and, seemingly, too cold. And Lanier is younger; the time has been, even lately, when we all felt his peculiar charm. It seemed only natural that you should feel it, even more than the rest of us have done."

"Why?" she asked, yet once again. "Did it seem only natural that I should forget my marriage vows? Natural that you, my husband, should have doubted me, your wife?"

"You doubted me," he ventured to remind her.

"Never! I knew that you had — had done a wrong. You thought that I had committed the one great wrong of all," she told him, with a woman's facile use of immaterial distinctions. "The two things are not alike in any sense." Then she fell silent, obviously gathering up her strength to speak. When she did speak again, she raised her head and faced her husband without flinching. "Listen, Leonard, and hear me out," she bade him. "Once for all, we must understand each other. I liked Duncan Lanier, at the start. It seemed to me I understood him, understood his terrible temptation. Then, as the time went on, I came to loathe him; but not until he had thrown on me the blame of his final falling down. And, in a sense, I was to blame. Moreover, I was idle, restless, perhaps a little bit hysterical. Always, before this, I had known what it is to have one all-absorbing task: college, my novel, what you will." She dismissed the enumeration with a careless gesture. "Then when time and — your coming put an end to those and left

me idle, I went to work to find another object of some sort or other. I took Mr. Lanier. Why not? Influence counts for something. Why not mine, as well as any other? And he was grateful, in his way. He even improved a little bit; and then, one day, something in the way he watched me made me realize that I loathed him. But, because I loathed him, because my work had grown so hateful to me, I had no right to leave it off. How could I know that you were displeased about it? You never told me. And I knew I loved you better than all the world. How could I know that your love, which I trusted so completely, held any room for doubts?"

Her voice failed her suddenly, and she fell silent, her elbows on the wrinkled tablecloth, her face buried in her hands. Then abruptly she looked up again, and gave a nervous little laugh.

"I thought you said, so long ago, you understood me, Leonard," she chid him. "You must have known that I was so constituted that I must do things. And — and there was n't anything I could do for you."

Coit hesitated. Then, —

"Only be loyal to me, Dorcas," he reminded her.

"And so I was, in word, in act, in — love," she replied, with a new and womanly dignity which all at once enwrapped her like a mantle. "Mr. Lanier was only an outside interest. How could I know that you would care, did care?"

"Dorcas," he made grave answer; "I am only human, after all."

His words fell into a stillness, and the stillness lasted, became unbreakable. At last, Dorcas rose to her feet.

"Then," she said, and the words fell heavily across the stillness, while Gordon, looking up at her, felt conscious of a sudden shock at the wan pallor of the face she turned upon her husband; "then you have been doubting my loyalty to you, Leonard, doubting it all along?" And, without waiting for reply, she turned to leave the room.

Coit took a quick step after her.

"Where are you going, Dorcas?" he demanded, for the look in her brown eyes filled him with a mortal fear.

She answered him, without a backward glance.

"To Rica Braithwaite. She can take me in, until I know — what next."

Then the door swung to behind her, leaving Coit and Gordon there alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IN the mean time, Pater had arrived. He not only exhibited, but he also sold. Furthermore he had commissions, more commissions than he could well have executed, had he possessed two heads and two pairs of ambidexterous hands. For the sake of the three initials that marked his sunshiny little landscapes, moreover, staid members of society stood in line, waiting for the privilege of sitting for the wooden portraits in the which Pater still took such infinite delight. Nevertheless, prosperity, waiting respectfully upon Pater, found him unchanged, unchangeable, the same old Pater who had made merry with Dickie and his clan.

In fact, when his scanty leisure allowed him, he made merry with them now. Only the growing claims of his art lengthened the intervals between his seeing them. Otherwise, he was the same; his old relation to the bevy of irresponsible and poverty-stricken youngsters remained unaltered. As a rule, however, nowadays, he was the one to go in search of them. One morning in late March, though, Dickie reversed the normal process and went in search of Pater.

Dickie might be irresponsible; but, in the matter of engagements, he was as steady as a tomb. Accordingly, the fact that he was cutting a promised lesson, that morning, betokened that he had tidings to impart. He found Pater hard at work in his studio, setting down on a fresh canvas the most salient items of a plutocratic sitter's countenance, and Dickie was forced to kick his heels in the outer sanctum while the appointed hour for a second lesson came and went.

The sitter arisen to his feet, however, and busy with his overcoat, Pater went in search of Dickie.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Dickie; but I could n't help it," he said, while he crammed a fistful of tobacco into his largest pipe. "I don't mean to magnify the claims of art; but it's precious risky business, the putting down one's first impression of what the picture ought to be. The whole thing is bound to stand or fall by that original outline. Afterwards, if one holds steady — But come in! Come in!"

And Dickie came. Later, when the plutocratic sitter had departed and Pater was smoking like an active crater, Dickie paused in his unseeing tramp among the pictures, and looked at Pater.

"I say, Pater," he said; "there's no end of a mess going on among your old friends."

Taken by itself, the bald announcement sounded disconcerting. Pater knew Dickie's rhetorical methods, though. Therefore he went on smoking tranquilly.

"Who all?" he queried, between puffs.

Dickie frowned at the dauby canvas on the easel, where curious blobs of colour lay, shining and wet, in the cold, clear light of the north window.

"It's a sort of triangular racket, as far as I can make out, a species of *pons asinorum*. Betty says —"

Pater looked up sharply.

"Is Betty in it? Who else?"

"Go slow!" Dickie bade him briefly. "I must take my time, or else I lose my head, you know. Where was I? Oh, at Betty. Well, as it happens, Betty is the only one that's out of it, unless we except poor Uncle Arnold."

Pater frowned.

"Speak out, Dickie. For heaven's sake, don't be an ass and try to joke at the wrong time."

"It's never the wrong time to be cheerful," Dickie contradicted for, even in a real crisis, the fun in him died hard. "Besides, we need cheer, too. Betty says —"

"Oh, do get on!" Pater adjured him. "If there's a mess going on, to quote your choice phrase, and Betty is n't in it, then do tell who is."

Dickie smiled at Pater's unconscious implication against Betty; but he saw that Pater's patience, stretched by the effort to discover the especial type of immortal soul encased within his recent sitter, was wearing thin at his delays. Accordingly, he came to the point as directly as only he could do.

"Lanier has been making an utter brute of himself, worse every week. You know he boarded with Aunt Rica. She put up with his — his — She put up with it, for the sake of old friendship; and I urged her to make the best of it, on account of the all-useful dollars. It had been growing intolerable for a long time. Moreover, he was mooning around forever on the heels of Dorcas —"

Pater's pipe fell to the floor.

"Dorcas! Damn!" he said succinctly.

Dickie nodded.

"Here, too! Dorcas is all right; but the man's a curly scorpion. Anyhow, two or three weeks ago, there were 'ructions at the Coits', one morning. Betty does n't know just what. She does know, though, that Wier, with the face of a stained-glass minor prophet, appeared to Aunt Rica, two days later, announcing that Mr. Coit had sent him over to pack up Mr. Lanier's things, for Mr. Lanier was going away to New York, that noon."

Pater stooped to pick up his pipe.

"Mmm! Well?" he asked.

"That's all. Since then, the fellow has vanished absolutely, hide, horns and hoofs. No one has seen him, or heard a word from him."

Pater refilled his pipe, lighted it, smoked for a while in silence. Then, —

"Of course not," he assented calmly.

"But — Where in thunder can he be?" Dickie demanded,

with a boyish disappointment that his tale had not been accorded properly excited attention.

Pater still spoke calmly.

"Drinking himself to death in some dive or other."

"No such luck," Dickie growled, his gaze on the impressionistic nose of the late sitter.

But Pater shook his head.

"No luck in that, Dickie. It's horrible." And, this time, his accent satisfied even Dickie.

Dickie sought to argue.

"He's no good to himself, and best off out of the way," he objected.

Pater spoke briefly.

"My creed does n't admit the good of going out, on top of a flat failure," he replied. Then once more he smoked in silence. When he broke the silence, it was in another tone. "The question is, how much has he muddled things for Dorcas," he said slowly.

With sudden petulance, Dickie kicked a chair out of his path, then started violently at the clatter of the falling chair.

"Confound it, Pater! I'm all off my nerve, jumpy as a cat in an October gale," he confessed. "About Dorcas: I think we need n't worry. She's as downright and as unsuspecting as any girl I ever knew."

Pater frowned at his pipe.

"That's the worst trouble, Dickie. A girl like Dorcas will walk into scrapes without an idea that such a thing as scrapes exists. Do you remember her, down here in New York? She took the world and everybody in it quite on trust; it was a constant marvel to me, the way she walked on the ragged edge of danger, time and time again, without a notion that she was n't on the firmest sort of ground."

"It's the business of Providence to look out for such people," Dickie grumbled.

"Exactly. And, in the rough and tumble life down here, it generally does it. Where it fails and goes off its guard is

in a home like the Coits', where everything seems safe and orderly as an eight-day clock. Just what should you say was the relation between Lanier and Dorcas, Dickie?"

"Hm!" Dickie meditated. "From my own observations, and from what Aunt Rica let out, every now and then, I should say Lanier was posing as a tame cat, in the penitent, next-day mood that follows a night out. When have you seen him, Pater?" he broke off abruptly.

"A year. Why?"

"From all accounts, he's gone to pieces badly, since. He seems to have lost all grip on himself, to take it as a matter of course that, whatever comes, he's not the one to blame. Heredity's a mighty dangerous cornerstone for any doctrine," Dickie answered gloomily.

"You say he's gone to pieces," Pater said, after a reflective interval. "Poor old Lanier! And he did have his possibilities, once on a time."

"He's got bravely over them by now," Dickie made blunt comment. "His moral self has gone all pulpy; like Camembert, you know."

"I wonder," his hand shut over the bowl of his pipe, Pater spoke slowly, his eyes upon the floor; "I wonder how far I made the trouble, Dickie, when I urged him to take that cure."

"Cure!" But, to be sure, it was no especial wonder that Dickie stared.

"Yes, last year. I found him in all sorts of a condition, one night, and took him home with me. Next day, I lectured and scolded him by turns, until I made him promise he'd lie up and take treatment. It's all right, if one sticks to it; the present gain outweighs the possible shortening of one's life. Of course, you know, it's an awful tax on the vitality. But, if one goes under for a second time, he goes a good deal farther than if he'd let events alone."

"Hm! And where does the cure come in, then?" Dickie queried.

"In the chance of one's not going under," Pater told him tersely.

"I see." Dickie nodded. "In the last analysis, they leave it up to you; but, in Lanier's case, the You was n't up to It."

"Exactly. That's why I worry. But, about Dorcas —"

"As I was saying," Dickie replied, quite regardless of the fact that he had been saying nothing whatsoever; "he seems to have followed Dorcas rather closely; and, meanwhile, Dorcas, according to Betty's notion, had some sort of a bee in her bonnet about helping Lanier to reform."

"Dorcas all over!" Pater made crisp comment. "Go on."

"That's all."

"All? Then what's the row?"

"Merely, I judge, that Coit did n't care about the reformatory process. I must say that I don't blame him, either. If I were the senile husband of such a pretty girl as Dorcas, I should n't want the serpent poking his red head into my Paradise."

"But, after all, you don't think —" Pater was beginning.

Dickie, however, interrupted him with a sudden savageness.

"No; I don't. What's more, Pater, if you do, I'll knock you into smithereens, and then burn up the ruins. Where are you going?"

Pater was struggling with his painting blouse, and jerking off the soft necktie which he allowed himself only within the private precincts of his studio.

"I think I'll go out and have a look for Lanier," he answered.

"What use?"

"I want to get his end of the story," Pater said curtly. "If there's a shred of truthfulness left in the man, he'll show it out to me."

"I don't mean that. What's the use in looking for him, one man in this great town?"

Pater spoke grimly.

"I've a notion I may be able to run him down. Remember, Dickie, it's not the first time I've been out on just this very chase."

And run him down Pater did. In a back room off a little street, nameless and unknown to men of Pater's type, unless, perchance, they had Pater's own reasons for discovering its resources, Pater came upon the sodden ruin of his old-time friend. Moreover, with the moral stimulus of a scornful tongue, and the physical assistance of a burly cabman, Pater succeeded in getting the ruin back to his own rooms. Then, when he himself had played the valet through the successive stages of hot soap suds and shears and clean pajamas, he bundled the erstwhile ruin into his own bed and left him to sleep it off, while he betook himself to his studio and worked off his nervous energy in splashing greens and yellows over a bit of canvas which suddenly took upon itself the likeness of a cowslip-spotted meadow. Then, for an instant, Pater stayed his hand. An instant later, his hand was busy on a different tube; and soon among the cowslips arose a snaky head, black and ugly, and pressing down the patch of golden blossoms against which it lay resting heavily.

"Now, Lanier," Pater said to him sternly, next morning; "I want you to make a clean breast of the whole thing."

Pater's studio was barred to patrons of art, that morning. Behind its closed door and face to face sat Pater, stern and placid as a mediaeval saint, and Lanier, half penitent, half defiant, and wholly irritable. Of the irritability, however, Pater took no heed. Under such conditions, one looked for childishness. What Pater did heed, though, was the curious decay of all that had made for manliness in his old friend. The day had long gone by when Pater would have cared, as he once had phrased it, to paint Lanier as Saint Paul, red hair and all. Lanier no longer kicked against the pricks; in fact, Pater had some doubts whether he still was conscious of them. And Lanier, as he sat there, listless, inert, to Pater's workman's eyes looked like a ruined portrait,

created clever and attractive, but muddled almost to non-recognizability, before the paint had fully hardened. Under the surface blur, only the keenest eye could make out the work of the master's hand.

Now, at Pater's stern demand, Lanier tried to face him jauntily. Instead, he dropped his eyes, blinking as if dazzled by the steady glow in those of Pater.

"What whole thing?" he parried.

Pater did not mince matters.

"This whole infernal year of yours," he said; "and then — Dorcas."

Lanier flashed into something remotely akin to manliness.

"Why Dorcas?" he asked shortly.

"Merely because she is very dear to me, dear as a child I might have had, myself," Pater told him quietly; "and because you have succeeded in linking your name with hers."

"Why not?" Lanier still spoke curtly.

"That depends upon the nature of the link," Pater replied. "Now listen, Lanier. You probably don't remember any too much about the last three or four days; but, from your past experience, you can imagine where I found you, and in what condition. It is ten months, this very week, since you called yourself a cured, a steady, reliable man. Please, first of everything, account for this sudden change."

"Does n't it account sufficiently for itself?" Lanier asked, with bitter recklessness. "Remember, you've known me for nearly forty years."

"I know I have," Pater assented. "All the more reason I can't account for you as you are now. The last I knew of you, you had the grace to show some little shame, to act as if you were trying to make the best of a bad matter. Now —"

"Well?" Lanier urged him, with an almost imperceptible sneer.

Pater disregarded the sneer entirely.

"Now you appear to accept the bad matter a good deal as a matter of course. There's only one step more for you

to take: the regarding it as rather attractive, after all. Hang it, Lanier; you used to be a man!"

"What am I now?" Lanier asked defensively.

For the first half of his answer, Pater's eyes swept across the figure which sprawled loosely over the opposite chair. For the second, —

"A wreck," he said, and his voice was wholly sad. Then he cast away his sadness and once more became aggressive, because he saw that Lanier had been nourished long enough on sentiment, that he now must have a more stinging, caustic dose, if there still were any possibility of his final cure.

"As I reminded you, it's almost the even year since we sat in this same room and had it out together. You gave me your word of honour that, if I'd see you through the cure, go with you, when you went in, visit you now and then, and look out for you a bit, when you came out, you'd do your share towards bracing up and being a man again, after all the years and the scrapes you had been through. Like a fool, I trusted you. Lanier, you're the first man I've ever known go back on such a pledge as the one that you gave me. I believe," Pater spoke reminiscently; "you even uttered the conventional blasphemies concerning your immortal soul. It would have been a lot more to the purpose, if you had spent your time and energy in silent pondering upon your very mortal sin."

Under the lashing scorn in Pater's voice, Lanier tightened in every joint, sat up, faced his old friend with sudden vigour.

"Please treat my oath as decently as you can," he said. "At least, I meant it."

"Meant it? Yes, as a pretty piece of gallery play. Otherwise — Why did n't you keep it, then?" Pater demanded.

"I did."

"How long?"

"As long as any man could do. As long as Fate played a straight game with me."

"Lanier," Pater rebuked him gravely; "it's awful rot, the way fellows like you talk about Fate. Ten to one, what you call Fate in large capitals is only your own infernal, selfish weakness."

"I was not weak." Lanier spoke slowly now. "I was quite steady for a long, long while after I took the cure. I should have been steady, even now, only I was tricked into — the — the other thing."

"Who tricked you?"

"Dorcas."

Then Pater spoke with a quiet, heavy wrath which carried infinitely more weight than any amount of noisy passion.

"Lanier," he said; "you lie."

"No; I don't. Be just to me," Lanier urged him, with sudden pitiful appeal. "You were n't there; you don't know anything about it. It's not like you to jump to unfair conclusions. I give you my word of honour as a —"

"What?" Pater said curtly.

This time, Lanier's dignity was the better of the two.

"A drunkard, if you will," he answered quietly. "You need n't have been so anxious, though. In any case, I was only going to say 'on the honour of the man I used to be,' Surely, there was no harm in that."

"No," Pater assented. "There was no harm in that; but, Lanier, it only makes the tragedy so much the worse."

With a sudden jerk of his right arm, Lanier swept the words away. He was sitting upright now, drawn to the full of his slim height, his lips had steadied, and his eyes met Pater's eyes defiantly.

"Listen," he said. "You used to be my friend; you always have been just, till now; and yet you get angry, when I talk about Fate. Listen, and see what else you call this." And, down to the last little detail, he told over to Pater the scene on the Coit verandah, that hot September day.

Pater listened intently, his head bowed forward, while he peered at Lanier from beneath his heavy, frowning brows.

After all, it did seem a little bit like Fate, in its pitiless sequence of petty events which led up and up to the final tragedy. Pater admitted as much to himself. Then, being the man he was, he admitted it to Lanier.

"Perhaps I've not been quite fair to you, Lanier, after all," he said slowly. "God knows I did n't mean to be needlessly brutal. And yet —"

But Lanier, now that he had gained a sympathetic ear, kept on.

"Of course," he assured Pater; "Dorcas had no idea what she had done. Afterwards, it seemed as if she could not blame herself enough."

"Afterwards? Oh, I see. Then you followed up the hand of Fate upon your own account?" The mention of Dorcas brought a recurring wave of sarcasm into Pater's voice.

Lanier shook his head.

"I don't mean that," he said, in what he seemed to feel was self-extenuation. "Of course, I came down here to New York, for a while. She did n't know about it, then."

"When did she know?" Pater asked incisively, for Lanier's time of potential dignity was ebbing fast, and Pater felt that there were things he must find out, before it had departed altogether.

"Not for a month after," Lanier answered, simply as a child.

"How did she know it then?"

Lanier looked up, apparently surprised at such an easy question.

"I told her."

"Told Dorcas! Told that child! Threw on her the blame of all your drunken spree! Duncan Lanier, you paltry, yelping cur!" Pater was on his feet now, and striding up and down the studio floor. Suddenly he paused, his fists crammed into the pockets of his short brown coat, his brown eyes boring the man before him like two sharp augers biting their way into decadent wood. "Lanier, do you mean to sit here

and tell me that you have given Dorcas Sloane — Dorcas Coit, I mean — to understand that her foolish, careless mistake, a mistake which came out of her thinking you at least the equal of the next man, has been responsible for all the mess you are making of your life?"

"I had to," Lanier said sullenly. "It was only in common justice to myself. She showed she despised me, drew away from me; she was as intolerant as Coit himself. Of course, I had to tell her."

"I don't see why."

Lanier's voice filled itself with extreme self-pity.

"To make her understand."

"Why should she understand a thing like that?" Pater demanded sternly.

"I needed her —"

"Well?"

"Sympathy. Help." Again Lanier stiffened to his theme. "Good God, man! Do you know what it is to be scorned by every other person that you meet? Know what it is to crave and crave the pity that never seems to come?"

"I surely do not."

Lanier once more relaxed, and settled inertly back into his chair.

"Then don't try to form a code of social ethics for us poor devils who do," he retorted. "Some day, even you may come to the same pass, yourself; and then you will take your turn at crying out for help. When that day comes — But Dorcas did try to help me. Why not? She was accountable. Besides, she had been through it, too."

"Lanier!"

But Pater was too late to stop the next words.

"Yes, cocaine." And again Lanier went through a period of narration.

When he had finished, this time, it was the turn of Pater to moisten his hot, feverish lips. Poor, poor little Dorcas, brave child that she was! And she had put it through alone;

she had made no call for sympathy and help, although she must have been aware that both himself and Dickie were at hand and ready. He remembered the time perfectly well. Vaguely he had known that something had been very wrong; he had had no notion, though, what was the nature of the trouble, nor yet how serious it was, how infinitely more serious it might so easily have become. And he had called himself her friend. Poor, plucky little Dorcas!

The part of the story which Lanier did not know, to Pater's mind, furnished the climax of the tragedy. It was one thing for the girl to cast out the temptation, knowing too well the resultant ruin it would bring upon her work. It was another thing entirely for her to carry on that work, patient and unfaltering, to the sole end awaiting it, complete and utter failure. Out of it all, there must have come the solitary consolation which follows the knowledge that one is dying game. And now, to all appearing, Dorcas had been waging another losing fight over Lanier's soul. To be sure, in this second warfare, the girl had been too innocent by far to realize that in this also there lurked an element of temptation. Nevertheless, out of the placid stream of babble now issuing from Lanier's lips, Pater was able to construct the remainder of the ugly tale, to assure himself beyond a doubt that Dorcas, indomitable and reckless of any strain upon herself, had once more been carrying on a wholly futile fight, goaded again by her old-time vague ambition to make her life to count as an active force in the sum total of the universe.

Lanier was still babbling placidly, when Pater interrupted him.

"Lanier, sit up!" he ordered curtly.

Lanier obeyed, blinking again before the steely gleam in Pater's eyes.

"To-morrow, you are going back to the sanatorium." Pater spoke with terse emphasis. "To-day, you will stay here. To-morrow, in you go. This time, you will stay until

I know your cure is final. I intend to see to that, myself. Later, you will spend the summer as my guest. No. You need not thank me. I am not doing it for you, this time, even though I used to be your good friend. I shall do this, simply because I know Dorcas Coit rather well. I know how the child is willing to stake her happiness and almost her hopes of heaven on the carrying out of her poor little ambition to make good, whatever she may mean by the phrase. I also know that she has given you some of the best stuff there is in her; and, to prevent the waste of just that stuff, I'm going to take a hand in the matter, myself. If time and drugs will do the deed, the child shall have the satisfaction of seeing you standing on your feet, like a sane man. Only — Now listen hard, Lanier! Listen, and answer me!" And now Pater's words seemed beating down upon the man before him, as hail beats down the summer grain. "As you value your ultimate salvation, tell me truly: have you ever spoken a single word to smirch the womanly dignity of Dorcas Coit?"

There was a little silence. Then Lanier rose to his feet.

"On the honour of a drunkard," he said gravely; "no."

And Pater, judge of men, believed him, as he stood there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AND now, six weeks later, Dorcas had gone to Rica Braithwaite.

When Dickie heard the news from Betty, he came tearing up from New York as fast as electricity and steam could carry him. In this, he was driven forward by a vague longing that Dorcas should hear her first remonstrant word from him. He was too late, however. Long before he arrived upon the scene, quite as a matter of course, Dorcas had had it out with Rica.

As might have been expected, Rica's point of view was uncompromising.

"You sound heroic, Dorcas," she observed, the morning after her guest's arrival. "In fact, I suppose you think that you are a heroine after Ibsen. It's a long way after, though; or, rather, a long way before. His heroines are women. You've acted like a spunky child."

Dorcas, still seated at the table, watched Rica moving to and fro, putting away the breakfast things. At last, —

"Would you have borne it, Rica?" she asked.

"Borne what, Dorcas?"

"The suspicion. The — the — insult to my honour?"

"From all appearances, you brought it on yourself."

"How?" Dorcas demanded, with rising indignation.

"By playing with Duncan Lanier, the way you have been doing."

"Play with him! Rica! And do you suppose that there has been a single day that I have not loathed him in my very soul, loathed him and longed to leave him to his doom?"

Without compunction, Rica brought Dorcas down from her heroics to the unlovely truth.

"Yes, I do," she said bluntly.

"Rica!"

"Yes, I know." And Rica paused from her homely task. "Your point of view sounds nice, very nice and very sanctified; but the fact of the matter is, Dorcas, at the start you were more or less bewitched by Duncan Lanier. No. Wait! I am not saying that you did n't love Leonard, all the time. Your love for him has grown steadily, ever since your marriage. At first, you did n't even take the trouble to appreciate him. You know him better now."

"Yes," Dorcas broke in upon her slowly. "I do know him better now."

It was impossible that her accent should fail to challenge Rica's notice.

"Dorcas," Rica looked her steadily between the eyes; "don't let the facts of my poor Arnold's death turn you astray. Yes, Dickie has told me all about his talk with you. The poor boy thought I would be pleased. Instead, I think it was deplorable. Even granted that Leonard Coit did make the mistake, the great mistake —"

"Sin," Dorcas interrupted.

Not even the empty cream jug in Rica Braithwaite's outstretched hand could take from the dignity of her gesture, as she said sternly, —

"Sin, if you will. But are you to be the judge? And are you so wholly sinless that you dare condemn your husband for just the one single fault? What if he condemned you in the same way?"

"Rica, he has," Dorcas reminded her, quite low.

"No; he has not. He has merely questioned you, asked you to speak in your own defence, asked you, alone. Instead of that, you condemned him, unheard, condemned him to an entire outsider. And for what?"

"You ask that question, Rica?" Dorcas queried, in amazement.

Rica bowed her head.

"I do. Who better? For I know all that it carried in its train, all its cause. I resented it at first. That time, though, is in the past. Arnold is my dear, dead husband. I would fight for his just memory to all eternity, and against all of this world and the next. And yet I know — no one knows better — that his business life was not his best life, that he was weak, perhaps, in carrying out his plans. Not that that enters here, though, unless indirectly. The real fact of it all has been that Leonard's eyes were on the future. He knew that old blood cools, runs thin. He felt sure that, if the business world goes on, as go on it must, new blood must be injected into it with every ripening generation. Was that fault, or foresight?"

Dorcas eyed her steadily, her chin resting on her clasped hands, her face intent and stern. At length, —

"And I thought that you were loyal, Rica," she said, in grave rebuke.

"Why not? Because I separate my husband's individuality from the great, inevitable current of this world's growth, hold it apart, and love it as a sacred thing? I see no disloyalty in that, Dorcas. Disloyalty would have shown itself in casting him aside, like an empty shell, once his aggressive business life was ended. To my mind, my loyalty would stand out in the fact that he was never dearer to me than in those later days, after his fighting strength was gone, after he came to rest, tired out, upon my own strength which, through all those earlier years, he had protected from the wear and tear of life." She hesitated for a moment. Then she went on once more. "Dorcas, how many homes would there be left, to-day, if, at the first word of reproach, if, at the first suspicion of a fault in the husband's nature, the wife — did as you are doing now?" she asked slowly.

Dorcas suddenly turned restive.

"Don't scold me, Rica," she said curtly. "At your age, I may find out that my blood has cooled down to the temper-

ature of yours; and my ideals of married life may settle with it. Who knows? Meanwhile — And yet," she added, in swift forestalling of what she feared Rica was about to say; "I am not a child in any sense. I was born old; I never had a proper childhood. Perhaps, if I only had, I might have been less hurt by Leonard's distrust of me, a woman."

"But, if he felt he had grounds for the distrust?"

"He did n't," Dorcas interrupted shortly.

Rica ignored the interruption.

"If he thought he had a reason for distrusting you, was n't it better, in the end, that he should speak out and give you a chance to clear the doubts away?"

"You lecture me, as if you shared his doubts, Rica." But Dorcas's laugh was more nervous than perverse.

Rica set down the cream jug with a little thud. Then she controlled herself.

"I do not, Dorcas; not in the least. Still, I can see how Leonard had them. Listen, child — for, after all, compared to me, and, more, to Leonard, you are a child. When you are as old as I, married as long as I have been, you'll find there's always one rule for the woman, another for the man. Never mind about the rights of the case; it just is. The thing that we women, left alone, would never count as worthy of a second thought, that same thing might drive a man to fury. We look at the causes, reason about the causes, and forget all about the result. He takes the result for just exactly what it shows itself to be, and ignores the causes absolutely. There was the trouble with Duncan Lanier."

"I don't see how." Dorcas, despite her denial of childishness, spoke sulkily.

"Then you ought to. What is more, in the case of any other woman, you would," Rica told her, with a fresh access of bluntness. "However, if you don't see it now, you will, in the end. You loved Leonard Coit as much as you could; but not with the whole of yourself. You kept one lobe of

your nature outside his influence, and you coddled it. You had the vague idea that, in some way or other, you were going to accelerate the speed of the solar system on your own account, and that this remnant of yourself — really, it has proved too paltry to be considered anything but the merest selvage — you thought that this small remnant of yourself was the goad which would accelerate the solar motion. Yes, I am sarcastic. I mean to be; you deserve it, Dorcas. And then, while you loved Leonard more and more with every single day, Duncan Lanier came along, and he fascinated your imagination utterly.”

“Fascinated me! Rica! You are insupportable.” And Dorcas, hot with rage, started to her feet.

“Yes, fascinated you. What else? And he is fascinating; none more so, when he’s at his best.”

“He did not fascinate me, Rica. I only felt — ”

“A moral accountability for his welfare. In other words, you offered yourself as the broom which should accomplish his spiritual housecleaning. Poor man! He needs a *grande ménage*, if ever anybody did. But, Dorcas, hear me out. If Duncan Lanier had been old and doddering; if he had shuffled his feet when he walked; if he had worn a long, thin beard, would you have been as anxious about his moral welfare? If he had n’t happened to have glorious hair, and appealing eyes, and a pathetic droop about the corners of his lips; if he had valeted himself a little bit less carefully, then would you have assumed him as your moral charge? Would you have hurried your drives with Leonard, to be back in time to give him tea and ghostly consolation, both sugared to the point of nausea? Answer me that. And then answer me, when I tell you that you have been hysterical and sentimental over a man who isn’t fit to black the boots of the husband that the Lord has given you. And then, don’t talk to me of loyalty, and of insults to our common womanhood. Leonard Coit has eyes. More than that, under all his calm exterior, he has a heart like a flaming torch, a heart that,

lacking proper outlet, can scar itself for ever with its own flame."

And then, without another word, Rica turned away and left the room. It was a good two hours later, that same morning, when the breakfast things at last were taken from the table.

It was the morning afterward that Dickie came rushing in upon the scene. The night before, he and Bertha had been instructing Betty in the proper mixing of a lobster newburg, when, after her naïve custom, the landlady shouted up from below that there was a gentleman downstairs, waiting to see Miss Braithwaite. Furthermore, also after her naïve custom, she informed the rafters overhead that it was the same gentleman, the very tall one, who called on Miss Braithwaite, 'most every week. Accordingly, it was with no distinct thrill of surprise that Betty found Gordon Coit waiting for her in the stuffy little parlour. What did surprise her, though, was Gordon's pallor, his nervous tread, as he paced up and down the gaudy room, glaring with unseeing eyes upon the crayoned portraits which thickly lined the walls.

"Betty!" he stopped his pacing suddenly, when she appeared upon the threshold. "I thought you never would be down."

She smiled, with careless disregard of his thinly-veiled excitement.

"I had to leave Dickie in charge of the newburg, while I washed my hands and took off my pinafore," she told him demurely. "It's almost ready to eat — not the pinafore, of course. But you'll come up and have some?"

He declined to light, in answer to her cajoling words.

"No, thank you," he said shortly.

"No?" She raised her brows in mock astonishment. "Then what in the world did you come down here for?"

His answer took her breath away completely.

"For you," he said.

And then he swept her from her feet into his strong young arms.

Later, and it was a good deal later, too, Betty lifted up her head and faced him.

"Gordon," she said, and her voice shook with the sharp fear which had assailed her suddenly; "is this — done — with any idea of making up for — other things?"

But Gordon's gesture was wholly masterful, as he drew her head back again into its former resting place; masterful was the intonation of his voice, as he made grave answer, —

"No, Betty. Never. It has been bound to come, these many years. Now, all at once, I find that I can't live another day without you."

There came another silence; longer, this time, more full, even, of content. Then, —

"Why now, Gordon?" Betty asked dreamily, without stirring from her place inside the hollow of his arm.

"Because I need you, Betty, need some one thing that I can hang to," he told her, and, on the words that followed, his strong young voice broke into something very like a sob; "because, you see, all at once the rest of my world, the world I loved and trusted almost as much as I do you — Betty, it has all gone bad."

In solemn and bored silence, Dickie and his sister, late that evening, devoured a badly dried-up lobster newburg. As Dickie gave a final scraping to the bottom of the dish, he uttered somewhat of the questionings which had been slowly rising up within him, during the two hours and more that he had awaited Betty's return.

"Hang it all, Bert!" he said. "You don't suppose —"

His sister waited for him to complete the sentence. When he had made manifest that he lacked any such intention, she took the burden of speech upon herself.

"You everlasting bat! Of course I do."

And then they sat and silently contemplated the empty chafing dish, until Betty herself came back to tell them. Later still, once their duet of congratulation had prolonged

itself through an interminable fugue into a violent finale, she also told them about Dorcas.

Next morning early, Dickie started to the rescue, valiant as any knight, and a good deal more hopeful.

Nevertheless, after an hour with Dorcas, Dickie's hopefulness had waned a very little. He had found her quite alone upon the wide verandah of the Braithwaite home. Rica, inside the house, was busy with her morning work from which Dorcas, as paying guest, was rigorously excluded. It was even possible that some notion of penalty entered into the exclusion; anyway, Dorcas felt it so. Moreover, it would have been a relief to have some active outlet for her nervous energy. Anything was better than to sit and brood upon the situation where she had placed herself; anything would have been far, far better for her sense of self-respect, for her own mood of self-justification. It was also possible that Rica Braithwaite, realizing that, had laid her canny plans accordingly. In any case, there was absolutely nothing at all for Dorcas Coit to do but sit and hold her hands and meditate about herself, and then about her husband. Strange to say, as the hours went on, Duncan Lanier and even Arnold Braithwaite fell out of her thoughts entirely. Of Gordon, curiously enough, she had never taken any thought at all; perhaps because there was nothing especially debatable about him, or about his present attitude.

Absorbed in her own black reflections, Dorcas had been too listless to stir, or to look up, as Dickie's quick step made itself heard, crossing the lawn below. No one had been farther from her thoughts, however, and she started violently, as his hail, unconventional and therefore characteristic, fell upon her ears.

"Hullo, Dorcas! The top of the morning to you!" was what, in fact, Dickie said.

She had an instant longing to run away, to hide herself behind the low verandah wall, even to crawl off behind it on her hands and knees, in search of some place of safe ob-

scurity. Flight being obviously denied her, though, she rose to greet Dickie with what grace she could. She sat down speedily again, however, fairly bowled over by his words of greeting.

"Dorcas," he said gravely, as he looked into her heavy eyes; "I never once suspected that you had it in you to act like such an ass."

The words were to the full as unexpected to Dickie as to Dorcas. All the way up in the train, Dickie had given himself over to planning the opening moves of a conversation which, beginning with cheery tact, should amble along an easy, devious path to sound advice and clinching arguments. He had supposed his plans were all in order, all crystallized past any possibility of change. Instead, the sight of Dorcas, sad and white and wan as she sat there, the one tragic figure in a landscape all glorified with the May sunshine; the memory of the old Dorcas he had used to know, a Dorcas who fought a losing battle to a plucky finish, who took approaching defeat, smiling and indomitable: all this, sweeping over Dickie, as he went striding up the steps of the verandah, knocked his carefully formulated plans out of his brain and drove him to the bluntest sort of truth. Curiously enough, the very bluntness of the truth proved tonic. Dorcas, seeing him, suspecting just why it was that he had put in an appearance, swiftly had made up her mind to hold herself aloof, aloft, impersonal and superior to all his friendly interference. She had expected an appeal to her reason, and had braced herself accordingly. Instead of that, Dickie's blow had landed underneath her guard, and, like most such blows, it had left her breathless.

Her breathlessness showed in her reply.

"What do you mean, Dickie?" she asked, with a futile effort after evasion.

"This." Dickie waved his arm. "Your being here."

"Where should I be?" she queried, still with the same manifest futility which she realized and yet seemed quite powerless to overcome.

"With your husband, I should hope." Dickie's bluntness increased. "Is n't that where most wives do belong?"

Dorcas rallied her forces as best she was able.

"Dickie, who told you I was here?"

"Betty."

"Betty? I told Rica not —"

"She did n't. Gordon was down, last night."

"And he told her?"

"Yes."

Dorcas shut her lips to a white and bloodless line. Then, —

"If you know the fact from Gordon, then I suppose you also know the reason," she said slowly.

"I also do."

"And you think —"

"I think you've acted like a blithering idiot," Dickie interrupted. "What is more, I never supposed you had such a fund of idiocy concealed within you, Dorcas. I used, in the old days, to suppose that you knew more than a bit about us men. It seemed as if you could n't help it, being the chums you were with Pater. Moreover, if I remember rightly, once on a time, you set yourself up as a potential fiction-monger. That ought —"

"Dickie," Dorcas besought him faintly; "don't twit on all the horrid facts you can remember."

"I'll twit on fiction, and I'll twit on fact, on anything whatsoever that will drag you back to any sense of reason; that will shame you back, if need be. Dorcas Coit, what are you doing, mooning here without your husband?"

"He —" But her very accent was that of self-defence, and Dickie swiftly lifted up his hand.

"Ware!" he bade her sternly. "You never yet have lied, Dorcas; but imaginings are the next worst thing. Hang your imagination, then! I want to know what Coit has done, to justify your hiking yourself off to Aunt Rica like this."

And, for one instant, Dorcas was silent.

Dickie did not wait long for her reply, however. Instead, he spoke again.

"Dorcas, I'm going to tell you. For four mortal months, Coit has held his tongue, for fear of hurting you, no matter what the holding did to him. He has sat back, smiling, and looked on to watch you playing psychological nursery maid to Lanier. At last, there came a time when, in justice to himself and to you, he could not keep still for another day. He'd sent Lanier away, the only decent thing that he could do, under all the circumstances. Then, after Lanier had gone, he had to watch you stalking about the house, as solemn as an undertaker's hired assistant, as glum as a butcher on a Friday. No; don't laugh! I'm in earnest now, if I never have been before in my life. Coit could n't know that all your sorrowful gloom had been developed to mourn over his one moral lapse that you fancied you had discovered; he could n't be expected to be aware that, in reality, you were enough uneasy in your own conscience to be rather glad to know he had some sins to mourn about. He thought, as any live, red-blooded man in his place would have been sure to think, that you were sorrowing over Duncan Lanier's departure. Perhaps you were a little bit, for all I know. Anyway, Coit was too large a man to sit about and mull over an uncertainty. He gave you the chance to speak out. Instead of speaking, you took your dolls and came over here to play alone in Aunt Rica's yard. Now, the one decent thing for you to do is to go back again and help Coit make sand forts in his own." And then, his rhetoric exhausted, Dickie paused for breath.

Beneath the lash of Dickie's tongue, Dorcas had stiffened herself to take her own inevitable share in the conflict. Being a woman, her first move was defensive.

"Dickie," she said slowly; "of all the world, you should be the last one to blame me now."

Dickie had been staring at the distant landscape, while he waited for his emotions to simmer down a little. Now,

at Dorcas's words, he spun about to face her, amazement written large upon his honest countenance.

"Good Lord, Dorcas! How do you make that out?" he demanded.

Dorcas smiled a little. Dickie's very amazement made her feel that she had scored a point.

"Do you remember, once upon a time — Dickie, it all seems very long ago," she broke off suddenly.

But Dickie, for the once, was obdurate.

"Never mind the sentiment," he said. "Once upon a time?"

Dorcas shut her lips hard. Then, —

"You told me," she went on very quietly; "that, when I grew a little older, a little bit less selfish, I would find out that one's real chance for reaching one's ideals would come less out of self-revelation than out of the attempt to reveal the best that lies inside the next man's soul."

For a long moment, Dickie stared down upon her steadily. His fists were in his pockets; his lips were shaped to an inaudible whistling; his eyes were very keen, yet curiously gentle. When at last he spoke, his tone was far less dictatorial, but infinitely more commanding.

"The next man's soul," he echoed gravely. "Yes, Dorcas, I did. But what about your husband? Surely, he stands next in line."

And then the silence dropped between them; dropped, and lasted.

Coit, meanwhile, alone with the servants at The Terraces, was experiencing his own sort of purgatory. It was now full forty hours since Dorcas had gone away, forty hours when sleep was not, nor rest, nor any appetite for food. Wier, with the extra sense which comes to family servants in crises such as this, alternately warded off inquiries from the office, and pursued his master with the trays of food which Coit accepted with his usual courteous gratitude, then sent away, untasted, only a little later. And, meanwhile, to all the other servants,

curious, and a bit strident in their wonderment, Wier maintained his most impassive manner, the while he fabricated ingenious fibs to account for the absence of Dorcas, and for Coit's manifest unrest. Nevertheless, while he told his fibs, he realized to the full their futility. It was idle to assure the gaping household that Mrs. Braithwaite was upon the verge of nervous breakdown and had sent for Mrs. Coit, late in the evening, when any member of the household was likely at almost any hour to see Mrs. Braithwaite, smiling still steadily, going off down town to do her frugal daily marketing. And yet, Wier told his fibs. What else, in fact, was there left for him to do?

All that first night and all the next day, Coit tramped the house, seeking in vain for some nook or corner which should not be filled with memories of Dorcas. It was quite in vain. Her image confronted him in the hall, smiled at him from the library fireside, gazed at him from the open door of the drawing-room; and, ever and ever beckoning, seemed to be luring him up the stairway to the suite of rooms which, for more than half a year, they two had shared in common. And from those rooms Coit fled away. The look of them was too full of associations, associations with the things he had adored and lost, associations with the things whose very mention had helped to bring about that loss. Into one room, the dining-room moreover, Coit refused to step. Not that there was any image there. The room seemed to him rather to be full of elemental wrath, of spiritual chaos. He dared not trust his riven heart, his bruised and aching life, within its portal.

And Wier, realizing all this, partly from his own sight and recollection, partly by instinct, after the first morning made no effort to bring Coit back to the deserted table. Only the night before, the crumpled cloth, the disarrangement of the chairs, the charts which Gordon had pressed into the fabric of the heavy damask: all these things, plainer than any words, had disclosed to Wier the fact that the crisis, earlier in the evening, had been no slight one. And, even had Wier

had his doubts, Coit's manner would have ended them. On that account, Wier disregarded the dining-table utterly, and pursued Coit with trays on which the things he liked the best were set forth cunningly.

All night and all next day, Coit wandered heavily, seeking to avoid the image that faced him always, turn which way he would, an image with high-carried head, and blazing eyes, and white cheeks, stained each with a spot of crimson. Then, suddenly and without a warning, revulsion came. It was then for the first time that Coit took note of the aching desolation of the house, his house spiritual, as well as physical. Turn where he would, it was so empty, empty of all that for months had made up his life. Indeed, it seemed to him that, apart from Dorcas, he had never known what life could be, had never really grasped the meaning of the very word. And, only so short a while before, she had been there with him; the whole place had been filled and rendered gracious by her presence, the presence now of a child, merry, downright, frank and enticing, now of a full-grown woman, earnest and restful in her tacit comprehension. What was it she had said, while they had watched New York sink into the rosy twilight of their marriage day? Success was comprehension? And now?

But then, did one ever really gain the fulness of success?

Searching in vain for the lost image of his wife, half girl, half woman, wholly comrade that she was, Coit tramped the house more restlessly than ever. Desolation faced him everywhere, a desolation so intense as to annul all thought. He made no effort to reason out the present; none to plan the future, none — yet. Reasoning only develops after one has learned the secret of endurance, not while the agony of the lesson is still going on.

Upstairs and down, all through the second night and half the morning, Coit still wandered. It seemed to him impossible that he should not discover Dorcas hidden in some room. Only the dining-room he still passed by. He knew Dorcas far

too well to fancy for a moment that she could linger there upon the scene of their temporary madness, for so it was that, as the time drew on, he came to reckon the hour which had torn their happiness across. Were such rents ever really mended?

Towards noon, he halted in the upper hallway, his hand irresolutely shut upon the knob of Dorcas's dressing-room. As yet, he had not entered there. Always, it had seemed to him sacred; far too sacred, now, and far, far too personal for his profaning presence. Besides, he shrank from the vast array of little things which must, of a surety, bear the impress of her recent presence. However, after an instant longer, he pushed the door open and went inside.

Once across the threshold, once faced by all that seemed to him most intimate of her belongings: her gown across a chair, her trinkets on the table, the small brown slippers on a stool beside the bed, he stood there dazed, less now by the vagueness of the desolation than by the full, the agonizing realization of what this desolation was bound to mean to all his later life. Strong man that he was, he faltered, and then, for support, he shut his hands upon the chairback where the gown was flung. Even through the silken folds, the wooden edges of the chair ground into his palms; but Coit, unheeding, only stood there, clinging to the chair, while he lifted his haggard eyes as though in an appeal for mercy. Instead, they rested full upon the placid countenance of Buddha, sitting and smirking down to mock Coit in his loneliness; Buddha, the broadcloth beast of whom, once on a time and long ago, Coit jestingly had declared himself to be jealous; Buddha, the fat gray elephant, cherished relic of Dorcas's old life, trusted confidant of all that had concerned the new.

Under his snow-white hair, Coit's eyes gleamed like bits of polished steel. Across his white, wan face, the blood flowed slowly upward, forcing into merciless relief the furrows traced there by his two-night vigil. Then, casting aside his lethargy as a man casts off an ugly dream to face a reality yet more ugly still, Coit let go his hold upon the supporting

chair, drew the chair sharply forward and mounted it, heedless of the crumpled gown, now fallen forward on the seat. Only a moment afterward, his strong hands had shut themselves upon the fat front legs of Buddha.

Wier had ordered luncheon ready early, that noon, had given to its composition far more care than he had ever put into any dozen formal dinner parties. It was essential that his master's fast should be broken soon. Else, Wier felt assured, The Terraces soon would be invaded by a doctor and a brace of nurses. The food cooked, Wier arranged the tray, then rearranged it. At last, however, he took it in his hand and went to seek his master.

The search was long; but finally Wier found him, alone, and in the dining-room before a burnt-out fire. When the butler, tray in hand, appeared upon the threshold, Coit was on one knee upon the rug, prodding fiercely at the little heap of blackened ashes which, only so short a while before, had been the broadcloth Buddha.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MEANWHILE, in the sanatorium, his cure almost complete, Lanier was teaching himself the hardest of all lessons: the one concerning the duty to forget the past, and just to face forward as steadily as may be.

There was much for Lanier to forget; much, of which, even a short year before, he would have judged his life incapable. In a sense, his broken cure had broken his manhood with it. He had retained all the old catchwords which had been, till then, the pivots of his life: *honour, struggle, accountability*. It was only that he had muddled their connection, had put them, one by one, to uses altogether wrong. Now it was for him to sort them out once more, to match them up with their old uses, or else — and better — to discard them wholly. Infirmary such as Lanier's is never improved much by discussion. And, earlier, even he had held his peace, and acted, as far as lay within him, for the best.

To Pater, standing by to watch the progress of the cure, no other phase of it was one half so pitiful as the merciless fashion in which, restoring Lanier's saner judgment, it dragged back into his memory every least detail of the past few months, dragged it back and left it, for his saner contemplation. The climax of it all was reached, one morning in late April, when Pater went out to the sanatorium to find Lanier, his face hidden in his hands, brooding morosely upon the suddenly awakened memory of his explaining to Dorcas all the ignoble train of circumstance which had followed upon that luckless hour upon the Coit verandah. It was then that Pater judged it right to break in upon Lanier's self-inflicted

tortures, and preach to him the gospel of forgetfulness and hope.

"You can't undo it, so what's the use of grizzling in your ashes any longer?" he told Lanier. "Better brace up now, and work out a new, clean record, instead of smudging up the old one with turgid, penitential tears. The Lord knows it's muddy enough, as 't is, so why waste your time, making it any worse?"

"But — think of my telling all that maudlin, solemn lingo to a mere child like that! Of my dumping my iniquity at her feet!" Lanier groaned, with a healthy inelegance of diction which spoke wonders for the quality of his cure. "The fact is, I deserve to be flayed."

But Pater shook his head.

"I'm not so sure of that, Lanier," he said. "Of course, in the state you were in at the time, you put on your colours pretty thick; but I'm not ready to say that they were n't true. Neither am I ready to say that the lesson, in the very end of things, may not do some helpful work on Dorcas. A hostess has her guests a good deal at her mercy; she ought to take the precaution not to put flint and steel together, unless she's ready to accept the risk of the ensuing combustion. For all practical purposes, she'd much better have fed you prussic-acid sandwiches, or cakes flavoured with cyanogen. It's an open question, to my mind, what chances a woman has a right to take, in testing the quality of the internal linings of her guests."

"But her guests should be on their guard," Lanier asserted, with an approach to his old, facile phrasing of his creed.

Pater frowned.

"Drop that rot, Lanier! It savours too much of the old days when you prated and did n't practise. Remember, you promised me that you'd eschew platitudes, henceforth and for ever. For a man of your mental and moral make-up, they're a more deadly dose than Mumm's Extra Dry. And, as for being on one's guard, that's also rot. No one can

always sleep with one eye open. Directly it shuts, the chance for mischief comes along and drags him till the Seven Sleepers are insomniacs beside him. On either side, it's best to take no chances."

"And yet, I must have seemed a hopeless sort of cad." Lanier spoke, with no apparent diminishing of his regrets.

Nevertheless, he was conscious of a slight surprise, when Pater failed to contradict him. Instead, —

"Not only seemed; but were," he told Lanier crisply. "However, the mischief is done with now, and you have had your medicine. Moreover, out of it all Dorcas herself may have reaped a salutary lesson, so you might as well finish up your regrets, and set your brains to work on something a little bit less profitless."

"Have you heard from the Coits?" Lanier queried suddenly.

"Not a word. Dickie sees Gordon, every now and then; but there seems nothing worth while to pass along as news."

"So much the better. Contentment does n't go much into making history, or even news. Likely they are jogging peacefully along their domestic trail. But what an ill-assorted marriage that has always seemed!"

Pater's voice sharpened suddenly.

"Best let that subject alone, Lanier," he bade his companion imperiously. "Once a marriage is made, it's not for you and me to stand by and watch it with a magnifying glass and telescope, in search of flaws. Dorcas was Mrs. Leonard Coit, before you ever knew her; so at least you are in no position to be judge of the success of the marriage."

Lanier looked him between the eyes.

"Then, by your own definition, you are. What is your impression?" he inquired.

Slowly Pater's sternness vanished behind a little smile, a smile not at all concerning Lanier who watched it brighten. Rather, it had to do with Dorcas, the old, indomitable Dorcas who had descended upon New York, filled with ambition

and with girlish courage, both of them as vague as was her knowledge of the conditions she would be forced to meet.

"Lanier," he said slowly; "in all the wide world, if the choice were mine, I could find Dorcas no better husband than Leonard Coit. He is a man of iron and steel; but the quality of the metals is of the very best. As for Dorcas, she is a thing of impetuous ambitions, of reckless disregard of consequences, of total ignorance that the world holds any ills but the most obvious ones of poverty and work, of murder and theft and arson. Once she takes the bit, she'll bolt and do herself some sort of harm. She was on the edge of it, here in New York. She was on the nearer edge of it," Pater's eyes lay full on those of Duncan Lanier; "all last fall and early winter. Another chance might not turn out so well for all concerned. To prevent that other chance, she needs a steady, iron grip to hold her down. She spells her dissipations under the name of *ambition, making good*, and all the rest of the words dear to the heart of the girl graduate; but they are dissipations, just the same. The time may come when she, too, may have to lie up for cure, unless Coit holds her steady."

Then, for an hour longer, Pater lingered to talk over with Lanier the details, as he had planned them, for their summer. Pater was sketching up and down the Sound, that year. He had hired a houseboat, and would keep a motor launch. Lanier, who always had adored salt water, could swim and paddle to his heart's content, while Pater pottered at his sketches.

"And, by the way," Pater added, as he rose; "I've more than a notion of asking Billy Braithwaite down for his holidays. He has them in May. We shall be off by the tenth, at latest. Why not have him come directly down? He'll be good company for you, while I'm busy; and there never yet has been a Braithwaite boy born without a secret yearning to run away to sea. Even if that is out of the question, at least, we'll give him more than a taste of salt."

And Pater went his way, contented with his final prophecy which, to his undiscerning mind, held nothing sinister within its phrasing.

Back in his studio once more, however, Pater forgot Lanier, save as indirectly he modified the problem of Dorcas Coit's development. That Dorcas's development was even remotely nearing completion, Pater was too shrewd a judge of his fellow men to believe, even for the fraction of an instant. Indeed, what he had loved best in Dorcas had been her vivid promises of what her womanhood, under the best conditions, might become. Pater knew Coit well by reputation, slightly by personal contact. All that he knew convinced him that Coit was the one man, out of all the world, who could provide the conditions best for Dorcas, the one man whose hands were firm enough, gentle enough, to guide the girl towards her own vague ideals. Pater's wise smile would have grown a bit sardonic, could he have known the dream of Dorcas that the day might come when she would sway her husband out of his destined courses. As well might the baying of the new-weaned puppy deflect the orbit of the moon which roused his criticism. The only question in the mind of Pater had concerned Coit's steady, quiet grasp; that question had stilled itself almost completely, when Pater had learned, in part from Dickie, partly from Lanier, the causes which had led to Lanier's sudden banishment.

As for Lanier? Pater puffed at his pipe contentedly, while he dragged his easel to position. Lanier, from all accounts, was slowly preparing to make good. Of course, it was bound to take a little time. The climbing up again is always the hardest part of any slide. Even despite Lanier's criticism of the Coit marriage, Pater felt that the time was coming soon when he could be trusted to meet his fellow men on a sane footing, to go abroad among them without a moral guardian always at hand and holding him on leash.

How long would it last? Pater, whistling, shrugged his shoulders and waved his pipe in token of his deprecating

confession of his own ignorance. *Quien sabe?* Sufficient unto the day should be its dénouement. In the mean time, all was right with the world. He fell to painting furiously, filled with the creative lust that contentment always brings.

Ten days afterward, his contentment was shattered by an unexpected telegram from Dickie.

"'Hell's popping,'" it quoted tersely. "Dorcas needs you. Come at once."

And Pater went, albeit his sudden going cut in two his final preparations for his joining Lanier at the houseboat on the morrow.

All the way up from New York, Pater wondered and worried by turns. He forecast every disaster possible, save the one which really had occurred. That one, curiously enough the corollary of all of Pater's long-nursed theories regarding Dorcas, that was the only one which never crossed his mind. On that account, the shock of it came with the greater force when Dickie, meeting the train in response to Pater's imperious telegram, told him the ugly fact in all its nakedness.

"Dorcas has left Coit, and gone to stay with Aunt Rica," Dickie said, with not a trace of his old humorous air of taking the world in any way it chanced to come. "For God's sake, Pater, go to her as fast as ever you can, and make her see the error of her ways, before there gets to be an open scandal."

Pater drew a long breath. Under his full brown beard, his lips stiffened. But, —

"Dickie, I dare not interfere," he confessed.

"You must," Dickie insisted tempestuously. "You are the one man in the world to do the miracle — for it will be a miracle if Dorcas is persuaded against that will of hers. She must n't make a mess of everything, just at the very start. And she's got too much in her to let her friends be willing to sit by and see it wasted. Pater, you must! There's not a soul in the whole world who can touch her now, but you."

"Steady, Dickie!" And Pater, steadying himself only by a violent effort, laid a firm hand on Dickie's shoulder. "How do you know all this?"

"I've had it out with her, myself," Dickie responded unexpectedly, and with more than a trace of militant pride.

It was as well that Pater's beard concealed his swift, involuntary smile. Dickie, as moral censor and guardian, was, of a surety, Dickie in a brand-new rôle.

"Well?" he asked.

Dickie's tone swiftly lost its pride. Instead, it became slightly testy.

"I did n't do an atom of good, not one single atom," he made frank answer.

Pater liked the frankness and judged it best not to question further concerning Dickie's methods. Instead, —

"But how did you first hear of it, Dickie?" he asked.

"Betty told me."

"That she had left Coit." Pater spoke reflectively. "Dickie, knowing Dorcas, I think it's rather bad. Did Betty tell you why she left him?"

"Some sort of a row about Lanier," Dickie made unpromising answer.

Pater looked startled.

"Lanier? I thought — What has he been doing now?" he demanded sharply.

"Nothing now. It was the old affair; only it never was a real affair, till they went on their nerves and bungled it," Dickie grumbled. "Of course, Lanier always was a red-headed scorpion —"

But Pater interrupted quietly, quietly put forth his correction.

"Not always, Dickie. What is more, I doubt it if he will ever be again."

Dickie so far forgot the Coit crisis as to turn a quizzical glance on his companion.

"Good old Pater! You creative artists are always opti-

mists. I suppose you're so used to your own blobs that you can see a picture under any sort of mess. However, to return to Dorcas, it all came out of what our Parisian brothers term a crisis of nerves. Dorcas was fearfully upset by the discovery that Uncle Arnold had been side tracked to make room for Gordon. She made no end of an uproar over it, when she found it out. From all appearances, she discussed it with every one in the world but Coit, the primary sinner. Of course, it was n't a pretty thing to do; but not even Coit could have foreseen the consequences. However, Dorcas endowed him with superlative clairvoyance, and took the consequences out on him accordingly."

"I thought you said she did n't discuss it with him," Pater interrupted.

"She did n't; not until she had grown glib by dint of much discussion of it with herself. Then, two nights ago, she fairly bowled him over with the result of all her meditations on the matter. Deuce knows what takes a woman, when she's on her nerves! Somehow or other, they dragged the talk around to Lanier, and then Coit lost his head. Like a fool, he took that time to ask Dorcas, quite casually, if she had been in love with Lanier. Did you ever hear the like of it?" And Dickie, his hat awry and his hair rampant, turned to glower at Pater, as if he had been the cause of this whole domestic turmoil.

Pater forebore to answer. After a minute, —

"What then?" he inquired.

"Then Dorcas departed on her heels, uttering maledictions. An hour afterwards, she and her insulted dignity were domiciled in the best bedroom at Aunt Rica's." There was no mirth, however, in Dickie's voice.

"Has Coit seen her since?"

"She won't see him."

"He's tried, then?"

"I suppose so, being human," Dickie said impatiently. "Now, what do you propose to do about it all?"

Whatever Pater did propose to do, Dorcas disposed it so that he could do nothing. She flatly refused to have any talk with him whatsoever. Accordingly, after an hour with Rica, Pater went back again to New York. That night, he wrote a note to Dorcas, for not all of her strictures could prevent the normal service of the mails. Whether or not she would read it — Pater shook his head over the sealing of the letter. He could only chance it. And his signet bore the single word *Constantier*, for its motto.

Chance it he did, then, and Dorcas read his letter. One sentence in it remained for ever after branded on the tissue of her brain.

“Coit is inflexible, but very just; he acted only for what he believed to be your good, the good of the best-loved portion of his experience.”

And again, farther down the page, —

“It is the place of you women to be generous as well as just. Otherwise, your life ahead of you would grow as hard and barren as an asphalted street. Even now, you still have it in your power — ”

All that morning long and half the afternoon, Dorcas sat silent, almost motionless. Pater’s letter lay open in her lap; his words, terse, forceful, went pounding through and through her brain. Tired and discouraged, and tired of her discouragement, she shrank from their continued drubbing; and yet the drubbing did her good. Moment by moment, her moral fibre stiffened to bear the impact of Pater’s phrases. Dear old Pater! Always and always, he had been her loyal, helpful friend. It was he who had overtaken her in the arid desolation of her earlier crisis, he who had bidden her to cut loose from futile lamentations and go to work, to sweep and dust her room, not sit and mizzle in a corner, while the dust grew thicker. And now, would he apply the same cure? How then would he go about it? Her glance fell to the letter in her lap. Another phrase or two leaped up to catch her eye.

"There never is an end to anything. What seems to us an ending is generally only a beginning in another key. That's why I tell you to begin again."

But how begin? Even the ending was incomplete; it was too soon to talk of a beginning.

And meanwhile Pater, on the houseboat, awaited the coming of Lanier and Billy Braithwaite. While he waited, he thought about Dorcas, and his thought was courageous. As he had told her, there never was any real end of anything; forces went on and on, approaching the full fruition which they never really touched. And Dorcas Coit's young life was far too full of forces, vigorous as they were promising, not to conform to the universal law. In the next chapter of her experience, all this present pother would seem to her as futile as already seemed to her the striving and the disappointment of her novel, as futile and as providential in its ultimate reaction on her life.

Pater was whistling like a boy, by the time that Lanier and Billy Braithwaite came running down the pier.

Ten days afterward, Pater was still steeped in the same content. Moreover, to the outward eye, there was no reason Pater should be otherwise. The houseboat now lay moored by the Connecticut shore, whose rocky, house-crowned crags every now and then seemed giving way before an advancing foam of pinkish apple blossoms. Before him stretched the narrow Sound, a stripe of vivid blue, barred here and there with the white wake of a passing steamer, spotted, too, with little sails that flung back the light from their fresh canvas patches, or held it warm in the wider stretches where the cloth was all brown and gray, all filled with shadows hued like the dove's wing, shading from pearl to deepest purple. Beyond the stripe of dazzling blue, there rose the sun-baked sand slopes of Long Island, to all appearing, even at this little distance, holding on their tops the edge of the great blue bowl of sky. And over and above it all, in and around it all lay the soft May air, alternately crisp with the salt

tang of the sea and heavy with the perfume of the shore.

And Pater, left alone upon the deck, true to his old custom, was turning his back upon the glory of sea and shore, of pinkish apple orchard and blue wave and golden sand-wall, while he added a few corrective touches to the portrait he was painting of Lanier, not as Saint Paul now, however, but as Saint Anthony the Hermit.

Even the ten days had wrought a wondrous change in Duncan Lanier. The outdoor life, the vigorous exercise, above all else, the jovial, chaffing comradeship of such a boy as Billy Braithwaite: all these had gone far to complete Lanier's cure. Bit by bit, Lanier was learning not to cry for the impossible; not to dwell upon the bad that had been, but to look forward to the good that was yet to be. His old-time magnetism was slowly asserting itself once more; already Billy Braithwaite was his willing slave, and Pater, rejoicing at Billy's healthy ignorance of certain chapters in Lanier's mental history, stood to one side and smilingly allowed the boy's devotion to have its way. Nothing could sooner down the last remaining shreds of his excessive egotism than the society of this healthy youngster who could eat goat-food and sleep the sleep of the just thereafter, whose moral soundness of digestion matched his physical.

All day long, then, the two friends were afloat, early and late, while Pater sat on the houseboat deck and absorbed tobacco and colour in almost equal quantities. By night, they all three of them sprawled on the deck until impossible hours, watching the stars, talking of friends, building plans for future usefulness. It was by almost imperceptible degrees that Lanier, taciturn at first, finally came to join in this plan-building. By now, however, his plans for brightness vied with those of Billy. He would take up his music in earnest again, once he got ashore. Next fall, he would spend a few weeks in Cambridge; there were some historical

manuscripts in the library which ought to afford good material for an article in some monthly or other. If not, over in Paris — And so he ran on, happy as a boy to find that even now his future held so much of absorbing interest, of insistent demand upon his time and brain. And Pater, watching him in the starlight, took fresh notes for his picture, the portrait which, even above all the sunny little landscapes, was destined to hang highest in Pater's own corner of the Hall of Fame.

Always Pater painted rapidly, once he found his work was promising success. This time, he had outdone himself, both in artistic value and in point of time. Only the day before, he had given to it all but the final strokes. All of the previous evening, he had sat smoking in the cloudy, soft darkness of a summer shower, while, to his mental vision, the picture stood out clearly, craving appreciation, begging for the last, masterly touches which should add the consummating glory to all that had gone before. Beside him, in the darkness, Billy was also silent, dreaming, doubtless, of the next day's catch. Lanier, in the cabin, was finishing a long letter, a cheerful letter, if one could judge by the serenity of his face, when Pater at last went down to look him up.

And now, alone upon the deck, Pater was giving the final touches to the picture. Then, the touches done, he dropped his brush and sat before it, lost in silent study of what he had at last achieved. At length, the brown beard stirred a little.

"*Nunc dimittis, Domine!*" Pater said softly and with perfect reverence.

Then, rising slowly, he carried away the canvas and locked it in his room.

Only for a moment did he linger there. Then, smiling in grave content, he slowly mounted the stairs and came out on the deck again. For an instant, he stood there blinking, as though dazzled by the perfect glory of the sea and sky; for an instant, even, he was nearer to his Maker than ever

he had been before. But the instant passed, broken sharply asunder by a strident hail.

Short as was the intervening time, the dreams and the content had all left Pater's face, as he rushed across the deck and stood, shading his eyes from the sun, while he peered out at the distant harbour where, at last accounts, Lanier and Billy and the motor boat had been blended into one indistinguishable dark spot against the white trunk of the lighthouse which rose upon the farther shore. The boat was nearer now, much nearer. Within it, Lanier was plainly visible; but Pater could catch no glimpse of Billy who doubtless, after his own casual fashion, was sprawling idly on the cushions in the stern. Pater's fears relaxed their grip upon him. His work must have been coming on his nerves disgracefully. Surely no hail so agonizing as his ears had made it, ever had arisen from the little boat whose drumming throb came faintly to him, as it danced forward above the sparkling waves. And Lanier was bending down; plainly, after his usual custom, he was fussing at the motor which had been a little balky, these last days.

An instant later, Lanier straightened up. This time, Pater could hear the hail clearly; could make out, past possibility of any error, the agonizing terror of its cadence. The same agony appeared again, another instant later, when Lanier flung out his arm, as if pointing to some object floating on the waves. Pater's eyes, even at the distance, followed the pointing hand, made out the object, white and brown; or was it — Billy's head! Pater's face whitened, too, and then grew rigid, as the floating object went down beneath the shimmering coverlet of vivid blue, just at the very moment when Lanier, mounting the seat, dived overboard into the same pitiless, shimmering blue sea.

Pater was swift and strong; but Fate was even stronger and more swift. By the time Pater had the canoe clear, and was paddling to the rescue, both heads, the brown one and the red, had come up together for the final time, then vanished

in the sparkling, happy May-time sea which closed above them, murmuring gently their requiem.

And, half way to the scene of the disaster, Pater met the little motor boat, dancing gayly to him on the sunny wave-tops, its engines chuckling and humming merrily over the ruin they had wrought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AND, in the end of it all, it was Wier who performed the miracle, as Dickie termed it, the miracle which neither he nor Pater had been able to accomplish by themselves, however much their combined influences may have helped on the ultimate result. Wier, impassive and efficient, and very, very faithful, to Coit, to Dorcas and, above all else, to the memory of his long-dead mistress, Wier had endeared himself to the heart of Dorcas in a way that too few servants nowadays can do. And Wier fell ill, less than two weeks after Dorcas had left The Terraces. The doctor called the trouble acute gastritis; but, in his own mind, he diagnosed it as the beginning of a nervous breakdown. Moreover, astonished that nerves should go wrong in a man like Wier, prosperous in his position, stolid of exterior, he confided his astonishment to Rica Braithwaite whom he met immediately after he had left The Terraces. He followed up the confidence regarding his surprise by a second confidence regarding the great hold the disease already had gained upon a man so strong, the equally great doubt in his own mind as to the outcome of it all.

Then, after a more personal word concerning Rica herself, the doctor nodded and went his way, wholly unconscious that he had been a messenger of Fate itself. Rica, however, did not go her way. Instead, she turned in at The Terraces, and then, a little later, she went back home again, her original errand unfinished and forgotten.

"I saw the poor old dear, myself," she mentioned casually to Dorcas, as she was taking out her hatpins in the lower

hall. "He looks so pinched and thin; but the saddest part of it all — you know he's just a little bit delirious — is the way he keeps begging somebody to go for Mrs. Coit." And then, without one backward glance, Rica went up the stairs and, hat in hand, vanished inside her room.

Her hat appeared to be giving her some trouble, to judge by the length of time that passed before she had put it properly away. The same trouble also showed itself in connection with her gloves. Rica was still pulling out the fingers and smoothing them with anxious care, when a peremptory knock sounded on her door.

"Rica!"

"Well?" But Rica never turned her head.

"I'm going now."

"Where?"

"To — The Terraces, of course. If Wier wants me —"

And Rica Braithwaite possessed the superlative good sense to answer carelessly, —

"All right." And then she added, as an apparent afterthought, "Perhaps I won't keep luncheon waiting. You may be late. Good bye." And she fell to humming a bit of ragtime melody.

The melody stopped abruptly, however, as Rica heard the shutting of the front door. Standing well back from the window, she watched Dorcas out across the lawn. Then, when Dorcas was safely beyond the limit of an irresolute return, she hurried to the telephone and called up Leonard Coit.

"It's Rica, Leonard," she told him. "Dorcas has just heard about Wier, and has gone up to The Terraces. I thought you'd like to know that she is on the way. And — I would n't hurry her too much, if I were you." And, her message given, Rica went about her interrupted household tasks more cheerily than she had done for many weeks. The cheer lasted, quite unbroken, until, next afternoon, she saw Dickie trudging up across the lawn, his shoulders bent,

his head bowed forward beneath the burden of the sorrow he was bringing to heap upon her other troubles, to crush them down completely out of sight under this final, overwhelming blow.

It was a good hour after the coming of Rica's message that Coit, his breath short, but his white face drawn into the semblance of a smile, stepped out of the library door, crossed the hall, mounted the stairs and turned down the side passage leading to the servants' wing. On the way, a shock awaited him, taking him quite by surprise and teaching him that, after all his effort, his self-made calm was wholly superficial. On a chair in the lower hall, just as she had tossed them off in passing, lay Dorcas's hat and gloves, the well-known hat he had so often praised, the gloves still curved to the warm modelling of her hands. At the unexpected sight, Coit's mask of stillness broke up under countless little quivering lines. Then he stilled himself once more and went on up the stairs.

Exactly what he had expected, it would have been hard for him to define, even to himself. The expectation, though, as he was quite aware, held in it dread, a masculine shrinking from certain inevitable sentimental phases of his meeting Dorcas. None the less, he braced himself to meet it, to bear it as best he might, for the sake of what would come after. Instead, —

"I really think that he is a little bit more quiet," Dorcas said, as the door swung gently open.

It was a full minute, before the dizzying mist fell away from before the eyes of Leonard Coit, a moment before he could see anything very clearly, or, seeing, realize what it was he saw. Then, as his brain rallied and sent its answer back to his purely physical senses, he became aware that Dorcas sat beside the bed, a white, worn Dorcas by reason of her waking agonies and of her hideous dreams; and yet the same indomitable Dorcas whom he had always loved. And her love for him? Coit grasped the handle of the door and

clung fast to it, as if to a tangible support for all his mental stress and strain. In Dorcas's brown eyes, honest, appealing and, for the first time in her life, more than a little self-distrustful, he could read traces of every emotion in the world save one. That one was hate. His hands shut all the harder on the metal knob, while slowly this fact drove all the others from his brain.

But Dorcas was speaking again. As she spoke, Coit noted for the first time that one of her hands was held fast in Wier's feeble grip.

"He's going off, fast, fast asleep," Dorcas said droningly, as if her voice were tuned to the ear of drowsy childhood. "I think he'll be asleep now, very, very soon. It's so long since he's been so sleepy; but now it's coming, coming fast. And then —"

"And then?" Coit echoed; but his voice broke upon the words. Dorcas's tone had been all for Wier, for their loyal old servitor; it was mother-sweet, motherlike in its note of protecting care. The look in the eyes, however, had been for Coit himself; and, after the spiritual cloudiness of his past two weeks, he was well-nigh blinded by the golden glare.

Later, she joined him in the hall outside the door. The smile had left her lips by now, and the light had died out of her eyes, leaving only the self-distrust, the piteous appeal. The gentler cadences, too, had gone from her voice. It was harsh, even, with its eager earnestness. However, the meaning of that harshness was unmistakable.

"Leonard," she said, while she laid her hand upon his arm; "I have been quite wrong; but, at least, however I have deserved it, I have —" She shut her teeth and swallowed hard for just a minute. Then steadily she took up her interrupted phrase. "I have had my punishment."

In his turn, Coit essayed to speak. He failed, though, and his only answer was the drawing her brown head down into its old place on his shoulder. At last, he found his voice.

"Oh, my dearest!" was, however, all he said.

Later still, down in the library, Dorcas broke the silence which had fallen on the room.

"Leonard," she told him, with a new, sweet gravity which lent a certain dignity even to her self-accusings; "I understand you better now than I ever did before. These last days have taught me things of whose existence, even, I had never dreamed. Perhaps, after all, I was the child you called me. Perhaps — For then new appreciations come to one, you know. But, in these last few days, when I have had nothing in the world to do but sit and think, sometimes about myself, but generally about you, I have come to see your side of all this thing. What I felt at the first was merely the outrage to my dignity, the hideous idea that, being your wife, I could allow the bare suggestion of such a wrong to cling to me. What I know now, know surely, is that, if you had loved me just a little less, you would not have taken the trouble to think of it at all, or, thinking of it, to have offered me the chance to speak in my defence."

"But, Dorcas — "

"Wait!" she interrupted. "I am not through yet. Do you know, Leonard, I sometimes feel I never shall be really through. A thing like this must be talked out to the very end; the least little bit of reservation, left to itself, may fester into a fresh misunderstanding. And, once we drop the subject now, it will be ten times as hard for either one of us to open it up once more. That's why I want to talk about Duncan Lanier. I want you to know all the truth about the matter. I saw him, two or three times, that winter in New York. No," for Coit had started suddenly; "I never met him. I did n't even know his name. But Pater told me a little bit about him, and I suppose that set my imagination to work. It was just as I began my novel, and I took him for a type. That was the real reason he interested me so much, when I met him here, that and the odd coincidence that he should be your brother-in-law."

"But you never said that you had met before," Coit said slowly, too much absorbed in the story to heed his own implied rebuke.

Dorcas heeded it, however. She blushed, but she answered steadily and without a trace of irritation, for this was one part of the punishment she had deserved.

"No. He could n't, for, until I told him, he never had realized that I was the shabby girl he had seen, one night, with Pater. On my side, I kept still, because," she shuddered slightly; "one of the few times I had seen him, he was very drunk. I forgot it, just at the first, in the surprise of seeing him up here; but, when Gordon told me all about the rest of it, I remembered."

"Yes." Coit's eyes were on the fire. His arm, though, was around Dorcas's shoulders as she sat, in her old fashion, upon a low stool drawn up beside his chair.

"And then, after that, after he told me what my carelessness had done for him, I felt I owed it to him to help him what I could to get on his feet again. By that time, he had lost most of his old attractiveness to me, a good deal of his interest. Even if he had n't, though, it never would have occurred to me that you would care. I thought you must know, that any man must know, that you were the one thing I really loved in all the world."

"Even when I disappointed you?" he asked her sadly.

Instantly her two hands clinched themselves upon his fingers, as they dangled from her shoulder, and now she spoke with feverish vehemence.

"Leonard, be generous!" she besought him. "Forget it, if you can. If you can't, then — forgive it." And she bowed her head upon his knee.

"I will forget," Coit's voice, low and grave, had all the accent with which one speaks a holy vow; "but not until after I have made as much restitution as I can."

Afterwards and for long, they sat and talked about Lanier. As Dorcas had said and as Coit had tacitly agreed, no little

bit of reservation must be left to fester in the mind of either one. Therefore they sat together, talking until all possibility of bitterness was gone for ever. The next day, they rejoiced that it was so.

At last, a maid came in to draw back the curtains and to bring in the tray, and that aroused them to a sense of time. Blinking a little before the sudden dazzle of the light, Dorcas sprang up in swift contrition.

"Leonard!" she exclaimed. "I never thought to telephone to Rica. What will she think?"

And Coit made happy answer, —

"The truth."

Two days later, Pater's letter followed his brief telegram of the day before. The letter came to Dorcas.

"Dear Dorcas," it ran; "I seem not to have much courage for writing to you. The bare facts you must have heard from Dickie. Anyway, I can't set them down in ink just yet; it would make it all seem too irrevocable. For the present, there's a certain restfulness in trying to persuade one's self it's nothing but an ugly dream. And, some day, there's a picture I must show you, a portrait I had finished, only the day before. Whatever its demerits on the score of art, I think it will convince you that the root of goodness in a man never really dies. Lanier, in the heavenly world, will not be one half so changed as Lanier was from the beast I found, down in a west-side dive. Wherefore I believe in immortality.

"I am sending you this letter. It was in his pocket and, as you see, addressed to you. I fancy it's the one he wrote, the night before.

"Yours,

"PATER."

The inner letter was a sodden, crumpled thing, still wet with the blue, shimmering sea which had closed over Lanier. Coit shook his head, as Dorcas held it out to him.

"Read it," he said brokenly. "I can't."

Bravely Dorcas did her best to read it aloud; but the tears came fast and dimmed her eyes, and her voice failed her, every now and then. Before the final words of all, she came to a full halt. It was a minute or two, before she could go on.

"You remember the first night we saw each other, and that jubilant *marcato* theme that went up and up, till the very heavens rang with it, —

Et sonus epulantis.

The song of them that feast! It was a curiously appropriate setting, viewed in the light of what we went through, afterwards; appropriate, and not too discouraging. Perhaps, even yet, some day I may be one of them, and — safe. The song of them that feast! Who knows? In the mean time, though, thanks to Pater, as you rightly call him, I am making the most of myself possible in the light of my present creed: To forget the past, live the present worthily, and, upon no account, to sneak out of my own accountability, here or hereafter.

"And you have helped me in the lesson.

"Your loyal friend,

"DUNCAN LANIER."

It was a full week afterward that Dorcas, joining her husband in the library, one night, after they both had been dressing for dinner, looked up at him in sudden question.

"Leonard," she asked him; "what has become of Buddha?"

"I burned him up," Coit confessed.

"But why?"

"I hated his doctrine," Coit made brief reply.

"Really? I don't. I only doubt it — now. I used to suppose that Nirvana, to be the end of striving, must be the end of life; but now — "

"Now?" he urged her, his eyes upon her slim young figure dressed all in shimmering browns, upon her brown coils of high-piled hair, and on her true brown eyes. "Now?"

"Now," she told him slowly, while she smiled across into his questioning face; "I know that, for me, it means the beginning of life's full content."

And then Wier, gaunt and pale, but smiling, came to summon them to dinner.



THE END





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